

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Summer 2021

Volume 47 Issue 3

- 439 *Ann Charney Colmo* The Virtues and the Audience in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*
- 457 *Dustin Gish* Reasonable Foundations for Happiness: The Pursuit of Self-Knowledge in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*
- 483 *Dana Jalbert Stauffer* Richard III, Moralist: Shakespeare's Critique of the Politics of Christian Piety
- 503 *Jeffrey A. Bernstein* **Review Essays**  
*The Philosophy of Emil Fackenheim: From Revelation to the Holocaust* by Kenneth Hart Green
- 519 *Borys M. Kowalsky* *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Artists of the New Weimar* by Sebastian Schütze
- 555 *Robert A. Ballingall* **Book Reviews**  
*The Spartan Drama of Plato's "Laws"* by Eli Friedland
- 563 *Adam M. Carrington* Shakespeare's *Coriolanus: two editions* by Jeffrey Kahan and Jan Blits
- 569 *David Fott* *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin* by Johnny Lyons
- 575 *Will Morrisey* *Memoirs on Pauperism and Other Writings: Poverty, Public Welfare, and Inequality* by Alexis de Tocqueville
- 587 *Antoine Pageau-St-Hilaire* *Leo Strauss and the Theopolitics of Culture* by Philipp von Wussow
- 593 *Benjamin Schvarcz* *Justice Is Steady Work: A Conversation on Political Theory* by Michael Walzer and Astrid von Busekist
- 599 *Daniel Tanguay* *Montaigne: Life without Law* by Pierre Manent
- 605 *Jonathan Yudelman* *Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason* by Pierre Manent

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- Editor-in-Chief* Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University
- General Editors* Charles E. Butterworth • Timothy W. Burns
- General Editors (Late)* Howard B. White (d. 1974) • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987)  
Seth G. Benardete (d. 2001) • Leonard Grey (d. 2009) •  
Hilail Gildin (d. 2015)
- Consulting Editors* David Lowenthal • Harvey C. Mansfield • Thomas L.  
Pangle • Ellis Sandoz • Kenneth W. Thompson
- Consulting Editors (Late)* Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) •  
Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • John Hallowell (d. 1992)  
• Ernest L. Fortin (d. 2002) • Muhsin Mahdi (d. 2007) •  
Joseph Cropsey (d. 2012) • Harry V. Jaffa (d. 2015)
- International Editors* Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
- Editors* Peter Ahrens Dorf • Wayne Ambler • Marco Andreacchio •  
Maurice Auerbach • Robert Bartlett • Fred Baumann • Eric  
Buzzetti • Susan Collins • Patrick Coby • Erik Dempsey •  
Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman • Edward J. Erler • Maureen  
Feder-Marcus • Robert Goldberg • L. Joseph Hebert •  
Pamela K. Jensen • Hannes Kerber • Mark J. Lutz • Daniel  
Ian Mark • Ken Masugi • Carol L. McNamara • Will  
Morrisey • Amy Nendza • Lorraine Pangle • Charles T.  
Rubin • Leslie G. Rubin • Thomas Schneider • Susan Meld  
Shell • Geoffrey T. Sigalet • Nicholas Starr • Devin Stauffer  
• Bradford P. Wilson • Cameron Wybrow • Martin D. Yaffe  
• Catherine H. Zuckert • Michael P. Zuckert
- Copy Editor* Les Harris
- Designer* Sarah Teutschel
- Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***  
Department of Political Science  
Baylor University  
1 Bear Place, 97276  
Waco, TX 76798
- email* [interpretation@baylor.edu](mailto:interpretation@baylor.edu)

## Review Essay

---

Sebastian Schütze, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Artists of the New Weimar*. With a foreword by Marc Mayer and an essay, “New World Nietzsche: A History of Becoming,” by Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen. Ottawa: 5 Continents Editions–National Gallery of Canada, 2019, 119 pp., CDN\$34.00

---

### **Nietzsche and Modernist Art, Part II: Was Nietzsche the Philosopher of Modernism?\***

BORYS M. KOWALSKY

*borys.kowalsky@gmail.com*

#### INTRODUCTION

The main focus of the first part of the present essay is the insight the *Nietzsche and Artists of New Weimar* catalog provides into how Förster-Nietzsche, Kessler, and company, working through such institutional vehicles as the Nietzsche Archive, the magazine *Pan*, and the New Weimar, fostered a cult of Nietzsche; and how Kessler used this cult and those institutional vehicles to promote a modernist art based largely on Nietzsche’s philosophy. Phelan and I also note or comment on some of the catalog’s deficiencies, the principal ones being that it does not show how Kessler’s exhibitions of the artwork of Bonnard, Rodin, and Maillol served those purposes; that it falls well short of making a convincing case for the centrality of Nietzsche’s philosophy to modernist

---

\*I would like to thank Patrick Malcolmson and Joseph Phelan for their thought-provoking comments and helpful suggestions for revision.

art (a deficiency it shares with the extant body of scholarly commentary on the Nietzsche–modernist art nexus); and that (related to the preceding failing) it does not even delve into the ways in which the New Weimar may have bolstered Nietzsche’s influence on the German Expressionists, not to mention various twentieth-century modernist artists elsewhere in Europe.

In this the second part of the present essay, I propose to redress one of those deficiencies in particular: the catalog’s failure to provide a convincing argument for its claim that “Friedrich Nietzsche was the philosopher of modernism.”<sup>1</sup> Naturally I cannot hope to establish here the truth of any such sweeping claim (though, as should soon become apparent if it is not already, I am strongly inclined to concur with the catalog on this critically important point). My objective is more limited: it is to show how, building on various relevant insights of the catalog, one can begin to lay at least part of the foundation for such a case.

I begin with a brief look at the nature of modernism. I then proceed to the question of Nietzsche’s influence on modernist art, which will take up most of this part of the present essay. After remarking on the foregoing deficiency of cultural and art historians’ treatments of this question hitherto (the catalog’s treatment included), I propose a remedy. The heart of my proposal is an extensive, detailed analysis of the influence of Nietzschean ideas on certain works of art by the famous and highly influential early modernist artist Edvard Munch that incorporates but goes well beyond the analyses and insights contained in the catalog. The hope is that my analysis can serve as a model for the numerous historical and philosophical studies of representative modernist works of art that remain to be completed if we are ever to arrive at an adequate account of the Nietzsche–modernist art nexus in all its depth and breadth.

## MODERNISM

What was modernism? In his book on modernism renowned cultural historian Peter Gay makes a statement that provides a good starting point for reflection on this question: “The jaunty slogan that Ezra Pound introduced for his fellow rebels before the First World War, ‘Make it New!’, tersely

---

<sup>1</sup> Marc Mayer, foreword to *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Artists of the New Weimar* (Ottawa: 5 Continents Editions–National Gallery of Canada, 2019; hereinafter abbreviated as the *New Weimar* catalog or, more simply, *New Weimar*); cf. Sebastian Schütze, *New Weimar*, 11. With a few exceptions, references to the *New Weimar* catalog take the form of citations of page numbers in parentheses, embedded in the text. References to all other sources are provided in footnotes.

summed up the aspirations of more than one generation of modernists.”<sup>2</sup> The aptness of Gay’s remark upon Pound’s slogan is amply confirmed by the title of Robert Hughes’s own brilliant television series and accompanying book on modernist art, *The Shock of the New*. Without attempting anything like a complete definition—even in his lengthy treatment of the subject (over five hundred pages of narrative text alone) Gay declines to do so—one can safely say this. For all the differences among modernist artists, which were often considerable, there was one essential characteristic common to them all: emphatic insistence on newness or novelty, and a radical novelty at that, in meaning and theme, but also, and perhaps even more so, in style. We see, for instance, a shift towards abstraction in painting which parallels the vanishing of all semblance of plot in fiction and the abandonment of the classical tonal system in music.

What modernist visual artists generally agreed on was the repudiation of naturalism and realism, even when they remained committed to some form of representationalism and resisted the pull towards pure abstraction advocated by Kandinsky. Granted, the abjuring of naturalism, realism, the whole classical tradition, and the like was already well underway in the nineteenth century. Yet the degree to which modernist artists departed from such long-standing, deep-rooted conventions of art seems to have been an order of magnitude higher. Even when they attempted (or affected) a return to classicism, theirs was nonetheless radically different from classicism in its older forms, with its more naturalistic tendencies. Expression, subjectivity, and symbolically significant or emotionally evocative distortion continued to hold sway over mimesis, objectivity, and descriptive verisimilitude. In keeping with this reevaluation of aesthetic values, the modernists made much fuller use of an aesthetic of the ugly or grotesque or primitive than did any preceding generation of artists—even the Romantics.

All of this helps to explain why early in the twentieth century so many more people had so much more trouble relating to the signature works of art of their time than at any time before then, and in fact were often violently repelled by it. This of course need not have bothered the typical modernist artist overmuch. In his 1922 essay “The Public and the Artist” Jean Cocteau (one of Nietzsche’s growing number of French admirers) shows complete disdain for the taste in art of the “masses” and subtly encourages his readers to think of the “new” and “beautiful” art as the most recent effluence

<sup>2</sup> Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (New York: Norton, 2010), 4.

of “aristocratic culture.”<sup>3</sup> A decade earlier, in his influential manifesto-like tract *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Wassily Kandinsky enunciated a “rising pyramid” philosophy of history which provides a theoretical foundation for such elitist attitudes. The artistic vanguard (according to this theory) is at the pinnacle of the pyramid of culture and spirituality, the masses at the base. Every time the pyramid rises, the masses reach a level of culture which is higher than the one they occupied in the preceding historical epoch, but which has long since been superseded by the avant-garde artistic elites, who are currently breaking new, still higher spiritual-cultural ground. It is safe to assume, as most twentieth-century cultural historians do, that elitist ideas and sentiments of the kind expressed by Kandinsky and later Cocteau were commonplace among modernist artists and their fellow-travelers.

The flipside of modernist elitism was its penchant for “heresy” (to use Gay’s term). Again, it is not as though modernist artists were the first heretics. Yet often they were far more extreme in their heresy and iconoclasm than their predecessors had been, and indeed, as the Dada example indicates, they seemed at times to revel in it and even make it an aesthetic norm or credo. Here too a remark by Cocteau, for all of its rhetorical overstatement, is apposite: “The opposition of the masses to the elite has always stimulated individual genius.... The worst that can happen to a work of art is to have no fault found with it [by the public], so that its author is not obliged to take up an attitude of opposition.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In *Bohemians, Bootleggers, Flappers, & Swells: The Best of Early Vanity Fair*, ed. Graydon Carter with David Friend (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 172–73.

<sup>4</sup> Cocteau, “The Public and the Artist,” 172–73. For an earlier, more understated way of putting basically the same thought, consider the last paragraph in Georg Brandes’s essay “Aristocratic Radicalism” (ca. 1887): “Soon, I believe, we shall once more receive a lively impression that art cannot rest content with ideas and ideals for the average mediocrity, any more than with the remnants of the old catechisms; but that great art demands intellects that stand on a level with the most individual personalities of contemporary thought, in exceptionality, in independence, in defiance and in aristocratic self-supremacy,” in *Friedrich Nietzsche* (Leopold Classic Library, n.d.), 57. Given how influential this essay also was in disseminating Nietzsche’s philosophy among the intellectual and artistic avant-garde at the turn of the twentieth century, one can reasonably view Brandes as a significant early contributor to the articulation of a Nietzschean aesthetic-modernist outlook, of which Cocteau was a later proponent.

*A note on postmodernism.* Postmodernism is a tendency in contemporary art best understood as a reaction to or against modernism. Hence the *post* in postmodernism, i.e., what comes after modernism chronologically but is also alleged by its proponents to have superseded modernism, on the grounds that the latter has exhausted its vitality and relevance. How does postmodernism accomplish this putative superseding? By fully extending or radicalizing certain tendencies already present in modernism. One of those tendencies is a Nietzschean repudiation of the primacy of reason, which in modernist visual artwork is exemplified by Expressionism, in all of its forms (I expand on this point in due course), and Surrealism. In postmodernism (owing to the defining influence of such thinkers as Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, Vattimo, and Rorty), that tendency reaches its limit in a thoroughgoing

## THE QUESTION OF NIETZSCHE'S INFLUENCE ON THE VISUAL ARTS IN THE MODERNIST PERIOD

What role did Nietzsche play in the rise and shaping of modernist art? Peter Gay has this to say about Nietzsche's cultural influence: "Nietzsche, the most eloquent rhetorician of subversion, had proclaimed the death of God and the bankruptcy of prevalent morality. . . . But at the time of his death eleven years later, his stirring message, at once aristocratic and anarchistic, had begun to reach, often to intoxicate, a sizable and enthusiastic audience. . . . More than anyone else, he provided his world with a climate for modernism."<sup>5</sup> A strik-

---

relativism. One of the main aspects or tenets of modernism was the distinction between high and popular culture. In keeping with their embrace of that distinction, modernists (much like their nonmodernist predecessors) tended to regard works of art as autonomous wholes, whose meaning is determined by the intention of the artist. And they invoked criteria such as ability to express passions or reveal important aspects of the world, unity of style, and formal creativity and originality, when judging the aesthetic worth of a work of art. All such ideas fly in the face of the radical-relativist outlook of postmodernists. For them, works of art, far from being autonomous, are inevitably shaped by conventions of signification governing earlier works. And since they cannot escape the grip of convention by referring and addressing themselves in radically novel ways to things "out there" in a world that exists independently of language and discourse, works of art can amount to no more than reinterpretations of preceding works of art. (Basically in agreement with Nietzsche's notorious claim that there are no facts, only interpretations, postmodernists insist that there are only texts without referents to anything besides themselves, which texts subsist only through interpretation and reinterpretation.) Like it or not, all that happens in the process of art-making is re-making, in a way that ultimately escapes the control of the artist—whose "self" has in any event been shown to be socially constructed and hence to lack the substantiality and autonomy it was once presumed to have—what has already been made, a "recycling of discourse," through "citation," "reinscription," or "adaptations from the past" (Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Brief Insight* [New York: Sterling, 2010], 120; cf. 116ff.). The only difference is whether it is done unwittingly, under the illusions and self-deceptions of traditional metaphysics, or purposely, through a self-conscious application of postmodernist theory. (Such, in brief, is what postmodernist ruminations about the "death of the author" and "intertextuality" mean.) Eschewed too are the modernist desiderata of aesthetically praiseworthy formal coherence and originality, their place taken by a kind of "deconstructive" eclecticism—the mixing and matching of "old" and "new," "highbrow" and "popular" styles or formal elements, carried out in a spirit of irony or parody yet so as to preclude rational comprehension and aesthetic evaluation. With postmodernism, then, most anything goes, and art is what it is said to be. Artistic democracy is the order of the day, as opposed to the cultural aristocracy once championed by the modernist avant-garde. A good example of postmodernist art is Charles Moore's *Piazza d'Italia* (*Italy Square*). As Laurie Schneider Adams sympathetically points out, the square is an exercise in postmodernist eclecticism, combining "Classical, Renaissance, and Baroque architectural forms, enlivened by the light and color possibilities of twentieth-century technology" (*A History of Western Art*, 5th ed. [New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011], 556). If these diverse formal elements do not seem to us to fit together comfortably, it may well be because they are not supposed to: lingering attachment to the idea that certain styles of art are demonstrably superior to others is subtly undermined by this sort of discomfiting, "deconstructive" eclecticism. For a discussion of postmodernism that highlights the differences between it and modernism and shows how clarity about those differences helps us understand postmodernist art, see Butler, *Postmodernism*. For an insightful critical assessment of postmodernism from the perspective of classical political philosophy, see Thomas L. Pangle, *The Ennobling of Democracy: The Challenge of the Postmodern Era* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), esp. 19–68.

<sup>5</sup> Gay, *Modernism*, 29–30.

ingly similar observation was made by the German patrician Harry Kessler in his diary well over a century ago: “There is probably no twenty-to-thirty-year-old tolerably educated man in Germany today who does not owe to Nietzsche a part of his worldview, or has not been more or less influenced by him.”<sup>6</sup>

The *New Weimar* catalog goes even further than either Kessler or Gay does: it declares, categorically and with the utmost simplicity, that “Nietzsche was the philosopher of modernism.”

From the time of Kessler’s diary entry to the dates of the publication of Gay’s *Modernism* and, a decade later, the *New Weimar* catalog, a good deal has been written about Nietzsche’s influence on various aspects of culture that would seem to bear out the foregoing comments of those two highly learned and insightful individuals. To speak only of the time period from the fin de siècle to the end of World War I—which includes the heyday of modernism—in the area of music, Richard Strauss’s symphonic poem *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the Strauss-Hofmannsthal opera *Elektra*, Gustav Mahler’s *Third Symphony* (which Mahler himself at one point entitled *The Gay Science*, after Nietzsche’s book of that title), Alexander Scriabin’s *Poem of Ecstasy*, and Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, for instance, have been identified as bearing a deep Nietzschean imprint. As for literature, the list of novels, plays, and poems of which the same can be said is endless: George Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman*, August Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, Frank Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*, Olha Kobylanska’s *Princess*, Thomas Mann’s *Toni Kroger* and *Death in Venice*, Herman Hesse’s *Demian*, André Gide’s *Immoralist*, and the poetry of Stefan George, Rainer Maria Rilke, Alexander Blok, and William Butler Yeats are just a few outstanding examples.

In the domain of the visual arts, Nietzsche is frequently said to have influenced, in style or content or both, Symbolist, Fauve, Expressionist, Cubist, Futurist, and Surrealist artists. Here such names as Ludwig von Hofmann, Henri Matisse, Ernst L. Kirchner, Wassily Kandinsky, Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, Pablo Picasso, David Burliuk, Giorgio de Chirico, Salvador Dali, and Andre Masson, to mention just a few, spring to mind.

All too often, however, the scholarly literature is sparing of details, at best mentioning only in passing the influence of a few of Nietzsche’s key ideas from works such as *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Gay Science*, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and at worst doing no more than dropping his name, in neither

---

<sup>6</sup> Harry Graf Kessler, *Journey to the Abyss: The Diaries of Harry Graf Kessler 1880–1918*, ed. and trans. Laird M. Easton (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 128.

case providing sufficient supporting arguments or documentary evidence. This is especially true of scholarly discussion of Nietzsche's influence on the visual arts. Even Gay has little to offer here: in the chapter of *Modernism* that deals with modernist painting and sculpture, while discussing Edvard Munch's artwork he limits himself to the rather vague, bland remark that Munch's "lifelong preoccupation with nonconformist authors like Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche, still widely treated as outside the cultural mainstream, only strengthened his subversive worldview."<sup>7</sup> And he completely ignores the Nietzschean aspects of any of the other artists discussed therein. This chariness on Gay's part is disappointing, given his earlier claim regarding the magnitude of Nietzsche's cultural impact.

The problem may well be that, because works of visual art are not literary texts, their meaning, and the influence on them of ideas from literary sources, are more difficult to decipher than in the case of poetry, fiction, or drama. (The same difficulty may be said to apply to musical works such as Mahler's purportedly Nietzschean *Third Symphony*.) This problem may have been compounded by the carelessness with which scholars have typically made connections between Nietzschean themes and specific works of visual art.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, although difficult, it is possible to make a far more solid case for the Nietzschean aspects of any work of art where such a case is warranted.<sup>9</sup> Not only possible but also, I would add, necessary, since failure to carry out such painstaking studies plays into the hands of all those cultural critics and historians who either play down or even deny any such Nietzschean influence, or, as in most cases, choose, for reasons not divulged, to ignore it.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Gay, *Modernism*, 119.

<sup>8</sup> For a similar explanation, see C. Short, "Friedrich Nietzsche and German Expressionist Art," vol. 1 (PhD diss., University of Essex, 1993), introduction.

<sup>9</sup> Short's work cited in the preceding note shows as much.

<sup>10</sup> Consider N. F. Cantor, *The American Century: Varieties of Culture in Modern Times* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998). Filled as the book is with insights and thought-provoking observations and interpretations, in his twenty-page discussion of modernism in the visual arts, Cantor can muster only the following meager remark on Nietzsche's influence therein: "Of course there was an element of Nietzschean philosophy in dadaism and surrealism, but they would probably have said the same things without Nietzsche" (101–2). This, despite his earlier claim (12) that Nietzsche's "vision of the undiscovered country, of transcendence, and of a cultural revolution of momentous and unimaginable consequences is perhaps his greatest contribution to laying the background for modernism."

I suspect that the regnant division of labor and emphasis on specialization in academia is a big part of the problem here. As one surveys the relevant scholarly literature, one gets the distinct impression that relatively few art historians have received an education in the history of philosophy deep enough to enable them to successfully make the kinds of connections between philosophy and art I am talking about. Nor is the situation helped by the fact that few historians of philosophy have received much of an education in art history. There are, however, mildly encouraging signs of a reversal of this

To reiterate a point made in the first part of this essay, one of the virtues of *New Weimar* is that, unlike many scholarly works on the subject, it attempts, with some success, to spell out in greater detail the influence of certain Nietzschean ideas on various modernist works of art. Yet, notwithstanding its achievement, a good deal more needed to be done to demonstrate and clarify that influence, especially given the catalog's bold claim that "Friedrich Nietzsche was the philosopher of modernism." And because the existing scholarship supplies far too little solid material with which to build a case for any such claim, the authors of the catalog could not get themselves off the hook by contending that their intention was only to expand on or reinforce a case already convincingly made in that scholarship.

Here I attempt to advance the process of making up that shortfall, by providing a close, detailed analysis of the Nietzschean aspects of Edvard Munch's works of art dealt with in the catalog, where possible availing myself of its relevant insights. Why Munch? I agree with the catalog's premise that Munch was one of the key progenitors of aesthetic modernism in the visual arts. Furthermore, we must keep in mind that Nietzsche influenced the overall sensibility and world outlook of succeeding generations not only directly, through his writings, but also indirectly, through a great number of creative individuals working in a variety of cultural media, one of which was the visual arts. In my view (which I hope the ensuing discussion will begin to bear out), few if any artists, modernist or postmodernist, played as great a role in mediating and shaping that Nietzschean influence via the visual arts as did Munch through *The Scream*, the *Friedrich Nietzsche* portrait, *The Sun*, and numerous other works of art. He accomplished this partly by illuminating, in unique, thought-provoking if perhaps not always entirely accurate ways, various aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy for those succeeding generations.

#### MUNCH'S ZARATHUSTRIAN PAINTINGS: TOWARD THE LIGHT

Munch was one of the earliest visual artists to be deeply influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy. In her biography of Nietzsche, Sue Prideaux states that it was August Strindberg who first introduced Munch to Nietzsche's works, and furthermore suggests that the iconic painting *Scream* attests to the "profound effect" on Munch of his encounter with the iconoclastic

---

lamentable trend, with potential, favorable consequences for art history (and naturally for the study of the humanities as a whole). Among these signs we can count the growing interest in interdisciplinary studies and regeneration of liberal education at the undergraduate level. Liberal education is, of course, not to be confused with a one-sided exposure only to contemporary postmodern, poststructuralist, etc., ways of theorizing about all things cultural.

German philosopher's writings.<sup>11</sup> According to the catalog (33), the Nietzschean interpretation of Munch's art advanced by Stanisław Przybyszewski (an eccentric Polish intellectual who also helped found the distinguished German arts journal *Pan*) served to "[fortify] the painter's own Nietzschean sense of self," as shown by the latter's *Self-Portrait with Lyre* (1897), about which more in due course.

In analyzing Munch's Nietzschean artwork featured in the catalog, we first take up the 1914 sketch in lithographic crayon titled *Towards the Light*.<sup>12</sup> This sketch was among many that Munch produced while working on a monumental cycle of canvases for the University Aula in Oslo. The catalog describes the sketch thus:

A giant nude stands on the right side of the composition in front of a towering rock formation and addresses with raised arms the sun rising dramatically above the sea. The brightness is overwhelming, the glimmering light refracts the landscape as well as the human figure into yellow, orange, blue and green spots. The heroic nude greeting the sun, and with it an upcoming new age, is ostentatiously inspired by Nietzsche's Zarathustrian wanderer, his solitary experience in the high mountains and his celebration of the rising sun. For Munch, human learning and the future of civilization were bent to a Nietzschean perspective. (112)

Here Schütze points rather obliquely to a link between the sketch and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, leaving us to infer that he has in mind the Prologue to *Zarathustra*. In the first section of the Prologue, we read that Zarathustra has been living in solitude in a cave atop a high mountain for ten years, but that one day he rises at dawn and, "greeting the sun," announces his intention to "go under," to go down or descend to "man." He says that he "wants to become man again," evidently for the purpose of sharing with humanity his newfound "wisdom." A little later in the Prologue we find out what that wisdom consists in, for we witness Zarathustra proclaiming, to the people gathering in the marketplace of a nearby town, that God has died and the "Übermensch shall be the meaning of the earth." Thus Schütze is also right to interpret the "rising sun" celebrated by Zarathustra as symbolizing

<sup>11</sup> Sue Prideaux, *I Am Dynamite! A Life of Nietzsche* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 355. Her comment on *The Scream* is worth quoting in full: "It captured the zeitgeist as nothing else: Munch has produced the definitive icon of existential terror on contemplating the consequences of the death of God, and the subsequent responsibility of man to find meaning and significance to life."

<sup>12</sup> Once again, to assist understanding of the works of art discussed herein, I urge the reader to consult images of them readily available on the Internet, using the information about them (e.g., titles and dates of production) supplied in the text.

“an upcoming new age,” quite possibly meaning (as the reader is left to deduce) the age of the *Übermensch*.

But Schütze also adds that this sketch is one of a number of sketches done around the oil painting *The Sun*, which was to be a central canvas in the University of Oslo Aula cycle (which as a whole, he explains, “is imbued with Nietzschean thinking and imagery”) (112). This is an important bit of information, because it clearly raises an interesting possibility regarding the symbolic meaning of the rising sun in still other oils that are part of the Oslo cycle, such as *Men Turned towards the Sun* (1911–16), *Women Turned towards the Sun* (1911–16), and even in *The Sun* (1911–16) itself. Could it be that in at least some of these other works, too, the rising sun symbolizes the dawning of a new era, the era of the *Übermensch*, as Schütze may be taken to indicate?

#### MUNCH AND THE ÜBERMENSCH

In his writings Munch does not speak explicitly of the influence of the Nietzschean idea of the *Übermensch* on his artwork. Questions thus arise regarding his understanding and use of the idea therein.

That Munch was, early in his life, aware of Nietzsche’s idea of the *Übermensch* can hardly be doubted. As Nietzsche scholars Carol Diethe and Sue Prideaux claim, by the mid-1890s, keen interest in this idea was widespread among the European intelligentsia, including men of letters such as Georg Brandes and August Strindberg, with both of whom Munch carried on a lively intellectual intercourse.<sup>13</sup> Like Munch, Brandes and Strindberg belonged to an intellectual circle in Berlin known as *Zum Schwarzen Ferkel*, as Schütze points out (32). It is difficult to believe that the idea never came up as a topic of conversation among these men in any of their gatherings. Moreover, it is held by a goodly number of Munch scholars that he admired Nietzsche and was generally well acquainted with his philosophy, and as indicated below, we have primary-source evidence that Munch had some

<sup>13</sup> Carol Diethe, *The A to Z of Nietzscheanism* (Toronto: Scarecrow, 2007), introduction, esp. xxi and passim. See also Prideaux, *I Am Dynamite!*, 352–55, esp. 352, where she states: “The *Übermensch*, rather than the will to power, was the concept that made *Zarathustra* such a cult text at the end of the century.”

As is readily apparent from his book on Nietzsche, which includes his influential essay on aristocratic radicalism, Georg Brandes was on the whole well-disposed to Nietzsche’s idea of the *Übermensch*. He seems to have equated Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* with “a human species higher and stronger than that which now surrounds us,” its greatness shining forth in the works of artistic and philosophical geniuses such as Ibsen and Nietzsche himself (Brandes, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 46 and passim). Brandes perceived *Zarathustra*, with its pronouncements on the *Übermensch*, as a crucial moment in Nietzsche’s larger endeavor to promote the rise of an “aristocracy of intellect that could seize the dominion of the world” (53), a goal Brandes too appears to have embraced wholeheartedly.

knowledge of *Zarathustra*, where the idea of the *Übermensch* is introduced early and taken up again and again.

What is not nearly as easy to determine is how Munch understood that idea in Nietzsche, and whether he adhered to it so understood or felt compelled to modify it, according to his own best lights, for his own artistic purposes. Here I can offer only my surmise.

In his *Friedrich Nietzsche* portrait (discussed in greater depth below), we see Munch depicting Nietzsche, whom he labels “Zarathustra’s poet,” as “somewhat over life-size.”<sup>14</sup> The nude figure reaching towards the sun in the sketch *Towards the Light* is portrayed as a giant, as Schütze observes (112–13). This reminds us of the giant nude male figure in Ernst Moritz Geyger’s etching *Der Riese* (*The Giant*),<sup>15</sup> which Munch likely came across when in Weimar or Berlin (and through his associations with Julius Meier-Graefe and Kessler, both at one time or another heavily involved with *Pan*). It is reasonable to surmise that, for Munch and Geyger both, the gigantic aspect of these figures symbolizes their greatness, which reaches its apogee in the *Übermensch*. The nakedness of those figures might be taken to point in the same direction, reflecting Zarathustra’s thought that “if [we] were gods, then [we] might be ashamed of our clothes.”<sup>16</sup> That is to say, Munch’s *Übermensch* (like Geyger’s) would be characterized by unsurpassed, even godlike and hence superhuman, beauty and nobility.

The nakedness is also suggestive of the *Übermensch*’s embracement of nature and life in all of their aspects, the exact opposite of the Last Man’s anti-nature and anti-life attitudes, which spring from *ressentiment*. In this crucial respect as well Munch’s *Übermensch* would coincide with Nietzsche’s, who affirms all of existence, with all of its pain and suffering, in a spirit of *amor fati*.<sup>17</sup> (For that matter, Munch’s journals and other writings contain remarks that echo Nietzsche’s *amor fati*.)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Reinhold Heller, *Munch: His Life and Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 188.

<sup>15</sup> Published in *Pan* 1, no. 2 (1895–96). See *New Weimar*, 88–89. For Geyger’s *Der Riese* as an image of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, see Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890–1990* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 168. In this connection it is also worth pointing out that, according to Prideaux, the “giant nude statue” Kessler planned on having Aristide Maillol sculpt for the Nietzsche memorial in Weimar was intended to “[symbolize] the *Übermensch*” (*I Am Dynamite!*, 370, emphasis added).

<sup>17</sup> *Amor fati* and eternal recurrence are said to be aspects of the Dionysian faith: see, for instance, *Portable Nietzsche*, 554, 563.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, *The Private Journals of Edvard Munch*, ed. and trans. J. Gill Holland (Madison:

Yet at times there do seem to be differences between Munch's conception of the *Übermensch* and Nietzsche's. If, as I suggest above, the painting *Women Reaching towards the Sun* in the Oslo Aula cycle is any indication, in Munch's view, contrary to Nietzsche's, women too could exemplify the *Übermensch*. (Indeed, one has only to think of Carmen, Salome, Lulu!)<sup>19</sup> In this respect, Munch's thinking seems in line with that of many other modernist artists and writers—E. L. Kirchner (consider his *Tight-Rope Walker*), Isadora Duncan, O. Kobyljanska, and Frank Wedekind, to name only a few.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, it is not entirely clear what if any is the difference between higher humanity and the *Übermensch* in Munch's view, a difference which (as we shall soon see) Nietzsche went to great lengths to articulate in the fourth part of *Zarathustra*, and which is arguably alluded to in Geyger's *Der Riese*.<sup>21</sup> There are times when Munch sounds as though no such difference exists, suggesting that his conception of the *Übermensch* or human greatness is a good deal more democratic or egalitarian than Nietzsche's. A case in point is his comment that the overarching theme of the Oslo Aula artwork (which includes the lithographic sketch titled *Towards the Light* discussed above) is "humanity as it strives toward the light, the sun, revelation, light in times of darkness."<sup>22</sup> Whatever the exact meaning of this phrase, it can be plausibly taken to signify a greatly elevated intellectual or spiritual condition that will eventually be within the reach of the general run of humankind.<sup>23</sup> For Munch this notion could even have a Darwinistic aspect, according to which the *Übermensch* is a future stage in the evolutionary biological

---

University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 18, 20–21, 25, 61, 78–79. Cf. the quotations from Munch's writings in J. Howe, "Nocturnes: The Music of Melancholy and the Mysteries of Love and Death," in *Psyche, Symbol and Expression*, ed. J. Howe (Chesnut Hill, MA: McMullin Museum of Art-Boston College, 2001), 57; and M. J. Strawser II, "Dionysian Painting: A Nietzschean Interpretation of Munch," *Journal of Art History* 61, no. 2 (1992): 167–70.

<sup>19</sup> The case for Frank Wedekind's (and by implication Alban Berg's?) Lulu as an *Übermensch* of a kind is made in Naomi Ritter, *Art as Spectacle: Images of the Entertainer since Romanticism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 114–17. One of several thought-provoking aspects of Ritter's discussion is her comparison of Wedekind's Lulu with Georges Bizet's Carmen and the Salome of Oscar Wilde and others.

<sup>20</sup> For Wedekind, see the preceding note. For Duncan and other Nietzschean women-artists as, or on the subject of, female *Übermenschen*, see Aschheim, *Nietzsche Legacy*, 61–63. The case for the protagonist of Kobyljanska's *Princess*, Natalka Verkovichivna, as a female *Übermensch* is persuasively made in Y. V. Ladygina, "Narrating the Self in the Mass Age: Olha Kobyljanska in the European Fin-de-Siècle and Its Aftermath, 1886–1936" (PhD diss., University of California San Diego, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> The wings and gigantic size of the giant indicate that he is more than human, higher even than the highest of humans (*New Weimar*, 89).

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Heller, *Munch: His Life and Work*, 209.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Pascal Rousseau, "Radiation: Metabolizing the 'New Rays,'" in *Edvard Munch:*

process as a whole.<sup>24</sup> Such ideas make one wonder whether Munch's reading of Nietzsche's philosophy, including his concept of the *Übermensch*, was largely that of a late adherent of the nineteenth-century Religion of Progress.

---

*The Modern Eye*, ed. Angela Lampe and Clément Chéroux (London: Tate, 2012), 160–69.

A thorough analysis of the entire Oslo Aula cycle would, I hypothesize, considerably strengthen the case for the coming of the *Übermensch* as a major theme of the cycle; and in addition would give greater definition to Munch's notion of the *Übermensch*. For comments regarding the links among Nietzsche's philosophy, Munch's 1906 *Friedrich Nietzsche* portrait, and the Oslo cycle that may be taken to lend credence to my hypothesis, see Øystein Ustvedt, "Edvard Munch's Portraits: Artistic Platform and Source of Renewal," in *Edvard Munch 1863–1944*, ed. M. B. Guleng, B. Sauge, and J.-O. Steihaug (New York: Skira-Rizzoli, 2013), 239–40. Also suggestive in this connection are the discussions of the cycle in C. Gilman, texts for "Catalogue of Plates," in *Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul*, ed. K. McShine (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 215–16; and Heller, *Munch*, 205–9. A complete analysis of the Oslo cycle along the lines indicated here would easily fill the pages of a short book.

It is important to get as clear as possible on how, and to what effect, Nietzsche's idea of the *Übermensch* made its way from the high culture of fin-de-siècle Europe, through Nazi and Fascist ideology, to post-World War II popular culture. Herewith a few exploratory remarks on the subject. For many modernists besides Munch, I argue below, the term "*Übermensch*" signified some form of greatness or outstanding nobility, as in the case of artistic genius. The Nazis bastardized the idea in the extreme when they incorporated it into their ideology of Aryan racial supremacy. In American popular culture after the Second World War, the *Übermensch* (first exemplified by the comic-book hero Superman, who doubles as the mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent) becomes in every way an ordinary person, with average tastes and conventional beliefs, standing out only on account of his extraordinary physical powers miraculously come by, which he or she devotes entirely to the fight for justice democratically conceived and the defense of the common man. In contrast to Nietzsche's, this *Übermensch* is thoroughly domesticated and well suited to a democratic society. That does not change much with more recent science-fiction treatments of the Transhuman (*Übermensch* by another name). Perhaps the latter's mental powers are more acute than those of his predecessor. Otherwise, the one major change is that the Transhuman's extraordinary powers are explained in a seemingly more intelligible, because more sciencey, manner, i.e., in terms of hyper-advanced AI, robotics, or genetic engineering (courtesy of Ray Kurzweil, Gregory Stock, Lee Silver, and other theorizers of that ilk). True, more often now than before, we encounter in Hollywood movies villains with superhuman powers, but those villains are merely arch-criminals and as such a far cry from the potentially greatly more threatening, deeply thoughtful, and highly articulate foes of modern democratic society and culture epitomized by Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. The postwar democratization and domestication of the *Übermensch* can also be partly understood as a strong reaction against the Nazis' diabolical distortion of the idea. What remains intriguing is the continuing fascination with the idea in Western, especially American, popular culture and quasi-scientific speculation. One wonders to what extent it has to do with the decline of the old, God-centered religion, as Nietzsche seemed to think.

<sup>24</sup> Like so many artists, writers, and intellectuals of his time, Munch was also well acquainted with the progressive, pantheistic biological monism of Ernst Haeckel, with its strongly Darwinistic coloring; apparently Munch even fused Haeckelian with Nietzschean themes in his art, much as Strindberg and Przybyszewski did in theirs. The inspiration for this Nietzsche-Haeckel intermixture could well have come from Sigbjørn Obstfelder, a Norwegian poet and essayist who was "one of Munch's closest intellectual and artistic associates" (see Patricia G. Berman, "Edvard Munch's 'Modern Life of the Soul,'" in McShine, *Munch*, 39–41). For information regarding the thought of Ernst Haeckel, see his *Monism as Connecting Religion and Science*, trans. J. Gilchrist (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016); and Georgy S. Levit and Uwe Hossfeld, "Ernst Haeckel in the History of Biology," *Current Biology* 29, no. 24 (2019): 1276–84. For explanation and criticism of the "Darwinistic" interpretation of Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch*, see Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 8, 66, 118, 131, 143, 149, 175, 311–13, 317n8, 328.

On the other hand, his oil painting *The Geniuses* (1909) suggests that perhaps Munch, inspired by Brandes's reading of Nietzsche, espied the Übermensch in certain artistic and philosophical geniuses. (Note the solidity and gigantic proportions of the three geniuses, in contrast to the wispy smallness of some ordinary humans at different points in the background.) According to art historian Paul Barolsky, Nietzsche had modeled his idea of the Übermensch on the great Italian artist Michelangelo; this led to great artists being identified, or identifying themselves, with the Übermensch. An outstanding example of the latter was Pablo Picasso;<sup>25</sup> Max Klinger's sculpture *Beethoven*, which (as Paul Kühn maintained) represents the composer as "superhuman," was an instance of the former (29).<sup>26</sup> Schütze convincingly argues that in his *Der Riese* etching Geyger identifies himself with the giant (88).<sup>27</sup> If the giant, in addition to symbolizing Nietzsche, as Schütze further suggests, also symbolizes Nietzsche's Übermensch, as I contend, then it follows that Geyger too viewed himself in those terms. Munch's according of Übermensch status to Ibsen and Nietzsche (whom he took to be a poet as well as a singer-prophet), and maybe even to himself,<sup>28</sup> would then have been

<sup>25</sup> Paul Barolsky, *Michelangelo's Nose: A Myth and Its Maker* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 151–56.

<sup>26</sup> American cultural critic James Huneker appears to have regarded numerous nineteenth- and early twentieth-century poets, novelists, and playwrights as "Supermen": see his *Egoists: A Book of Supermen—Stendhal, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Anatole France, Huysmans, Barres, Nietzsche, Blake, Ibsen, Stirner, and Ernest Hello* (New York: Scribner's, 1909). Short informs us that Kandinsky, in a letter to Schoenberg dated April 24, 1923, says, "We should strive to be 'supermen.' That is the duty of the few" ("Nietzsche and German Expressionist Art," section 3, "Nietzsche and Expressionism," subsection 2, "Der Blaue Reiter"). For further discussion of the tendency on the part of artists in the 1890s and after to equate Übermensch and Artist, see C. Cernuschi, "Sex and Psyche, Nature and Nurture, the Personal and the Political: Edvard Munch and German Expressionism," in Howe, *Psyche, Symbol and Expression*, 139–40; and Aschheim, *Nietzsche Legacy*, 61, 65–66, 70–71.

<sup>27</sup> Schütze states: "As one of [the dwarves] tears a garland off the base he uncovers Geyger's signature 'E.M.G.95,' thereby emphasizing the artist's strong identification with the giant." But of course, as pointed out in the first part of this study, the giant turns out on Schütze's reading to be Nietzsche.

<sup>28</sup> Munch biographer Reinhold Heller (*Munch*, 189) suggests that Munch may be identifying himself with Nietzsche in his 1906 *Nietzsche* painting. According to the catalog, Munch is self-identifying with Nietzsche in his *Self-Portrait with Lyre* (*New Weimar*, 33, 106–7). Given also that in some of his artwork he portrays Nietzsche as an Übermensch, Munch therewith implicitly puts himself in the same category, or at least invites his viewers to consider him in the same light: cf. Cernuschi, "Munch and German Expressionism," in Howe, *Psyche, Symbol and Expression*, 139–40. Munch may have been inspired thereto by the example of Geyger. Evidently some commentators on his work, such as Stanislaw Przybyszewski and Gösta Svenaues, did indeed regard Munch in that light. In Przybyszewski's case, we can infer as much from Cernuschi (139) as well as Per Faxneld, "Esotericism in Modernity, and the Lure of the Occult Elite: The Seekers of the Zum Schwarzen Ferkel Circle," in *Vigeland and Munch*, ed. Trine Otte Bak Nielsen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 101; and consider Faxneld in conjunction with Przybyszewski, "On the Paths of the Soul: Gustav Vigeland," and "The Work of Edvard Munch," also in Nielsen, *Vigeland and Munch*. For Svenaues, see Strawser, "Dionysian Painting," 166.

perfectly in keeping with this turn-of-century development.<sup>29</sup> But in that case, Munch's notion of the *Übermensch*, like both Nietzsche's notion and Brandes's reading of it, would have had a more aristocratic or elitist thrust, and would have been difficult to square with the Religion of Progress.

If we wish to attribute to Munch's artwork at the very least intimations of some robust notion of the *Übermensch*, then we may be expected to offer an explanation of why he himself does not remark on that explicitly in his letters, journals, or notebooks. One possible answer is that he is not compelled to, and his failure to do so does not entitle us to conclude that the idea had no meaning for him, since it does not rule out the possibility that the idea finds more than adequate expression in his artistic corpus. It would then be up to the careful interpreter of his artwork to find and understand the idea therein, just as it is up to the careful reader of a major play, novel, poem, or musical composition to find and understand it in the work, even when the idea is not explicitly mentioned but only implicitly woven into the fabric of the work.

An example of that sort of thoughtful, penetrating reading of Munch's painting *The Sun* was arguably provided by the composer Richard Strauss. According to Munch biographer Sue Prideaux, "[the] power of the sight" so vividly captured in the painting "called to mind some of Munch's favorite texts," among them Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Prideaux goes on to say that on seeing the painting (in Oslo in 1917 at a performance of his own music, it turns out) Strauss "exclaimed that it corresponded exactly to what he was trying to do in terms of music."<sup>30</sup> Which of his works of music Strauss was referring to Prideaux does not say, but we may reasonably suppose that his tone poem *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1896) was among them.<sup>31</sup> His aim in composing the work was "to convey in music an idea of the evolution of the human race from its origin, through the various phases of development, religious as well as scientific, up to Nietzsche's idea of the Superman."<sup>32</sup> From these facts taken together we may perhaps gather that Strauss interpreted Munch's *Sun*, in the context of the Oslo cycle in its totality (which includes paintings such as *Towards the Light*, discussed above), as symbolizing the dawn of the era of the *Übermensch*.

<sup>29</sup> Note, however, that he apparently includes the philosopher Socrates in that august company as well.

<sup>30</sup> Sue Prideaux, *Edvard Munch: Behind the Scream* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 276.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Richard Cohen, *Chasing the Sun: The Epic Story of the Star That Gives Us Life* (Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> John Williamson, *Strauss: Also Sprach Zarathustra* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 28.

A second reason for Munch's reticence about the *Übermensch* in his writings may have been prudential reserve. The world outlook of the European cultural and political elites of the time was by and large still very traditionalist or conservative, which in the field of the visual arts translated into academism. The rise of the *Übermensch*, to be preceded by centuries of social strife and even wars waged on a global scale by a European planetary aristocracy—such a scenario, widely associated with the name of Nietzsche, would have been anathema to most of Europe's ruling class.<sup>33</sup> Munch, although willing to challenge cultural orthodoxy, might well have believed that there was only so far he could go explicitly before committing artistic suicide, and that to speak openly and sympathetically of the *Übermensch* in any sense of the term which could directly link him to Nietzsche would come at just such a price.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> As Munch was surely aware, *Zarathustra* makes abundantly clear Nietzsche's expectation that his idea of the *Übermensch* would sit ill with the vast majority of his contemporaries, regardless of their social standing. That Nietzsche was right to have this expectation is attested by the fact that Max Nordau's book *Degeneration* (1892), in which Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* and other key philosophical ideas are explained as the product of "illusions of sense and diseased organic processes," was popular enough to be "quickly translated into numerous languages": Aschheim, *Nietzsche Legacy*, 28, 29. For a discussion of the early reception of Nietzsche's philosophy in Germany, including anti-Nietzschean sentiments such as those voiced in Nordau's book, see *ibid.*, 24–29.

<sup>34</sup> Here we hit upon the issue of esotericism, dissimulation, reserve, and the like in painting. I have in mind not the esotericism associated with various strands of occultism springing from Neoplatonist, Hermeticist, and Theosophical sources, but rather esotericism of the politico-philosophical kind identified by, among others, Francis Bacon, John Toland, Friedrich Lange, and, most recently, Leo Strauss and his students. The presence of esotericism of the latter kind in the visual arts has not been delved into with anything like the rigor and depth that its presence in philosophy and literature has been, yet in my opinion it should be. A fine example of the type of study called for is Steven A. Mansbach, "Pieter Bruegel's Tower of Babel," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 45, no. 1 (1982): 43–56. Another, earlier example is Howard B. White, "Rembrandt and the Human Condition," in *Antiquity Forgot: Essays on Shakespeare, Bacon, and Rembrandt* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978). Short points out that Expressionist artist Frans Marc, who collaborated with Kandinsky in producing the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*, believed "an esotericism was unavoidable, even desirable," meaning (I take it) a politico-philosophical esotericism ("Nietzsche and German Expressionist Art," section 3, subsection 2). Helpful insights can also be gleaned from Nietzsche's comment on Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* in *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, aph. 73; and Walter Pater's thought-provoking studies of Renaissance artists, including Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. This is the subject of a future essay entitled "On a Forgotten Kind of Painting?"

To return briefly to Munch, one gathers from art historian Per Faxneld that, perhaps prompted thereby by Przybyszewski and Strindberg, Munch took an active interest in esotericism of the nineteenth-century occultist variety ("Esotericism in Modernity," 100). Taking Faxneld as a point of departure, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that Munch was at least vaguely aware of and even to an extent also practiced the other type of esotericism referred to above—more so since the two kinds are not mutually exclusive. Przybyszewski would very likely have concurred with this hypothesis: see his two articles "Vigeland" and "Munch," in Nielsen, *Vigeland and Munch*, esp. 74 and 79 in the first, and 91 in the second. Consider, too, the following comment by Svenaeus, quoted in Strawser, "Dionysian Painting," 166: "He possessed in high degree what he called 'the giving virtue.' Munch never let anyone into his life. He jealously watched over his personality's integrity, while he ruthlessly surrendered himself. But the public also made it clear for him that 'the person who doesn't make any

In any event, the absence of *explicit* mention of the Übermensch concept in any of his works of art or written remarks on them does not warrant the conclusion that Munch would have no truck with, or had no use for, the idea.<sup>35</sup>

---

mystery of himself, [he] arouses evil blood,' because the people fear nudity and don't want to know the truth about themselves." In a letter to the person who commissioned his 1906 *Nietzsche* portrait (see note 38 below), Munch offers one possible, and seemingly innocuous or "safe," interpretation of the work's meaning, and then raises the possibility of at least one other interpretation, but without telling us what that might be. It is not unreasonable to suppose that he leaves it to the searching viewer of the painting to figure it out (as I attempt to do below).

Let us dwell a moment longer on the possibility of Munchian esotericism. The last two sentences of the passage in question from the above-mentioned letter read as follows: "I have depicted him as Zarathustra's poet among mountains in his lair; he stands on his veranda and looks down into a valley while the sun rises over the mountains. One can think of the place where he speaks of standing in the light but wishing to be in shadow, but it is also possible to think of much else." Prideaux (*Behind the Scream*, 232) and Heller (*Munch*, 188) both assume that the "place" Munch is alluding to is in *Zarathustra*, but neither offers any textual evidence for this prima facie perfectly reasonable assumption. The problem is that a search through the text turns up no passage corresponding to the description of Zarathustra as "standing in the light but wishing to be in shadow." Two inferences are possible: either Munch is not a particularly careful reader of Nietzsche, or he is being deliberately opaque or deceptive, that is, he is dissembling. Because, *pace* our deconstructionist friends, we really have no compelling reason not to, let us give Munch the benefit of the doubt and go with the second possible inference. Consider also that the description itself, if interpreted figuratively, suggests that Nietzsche (like Zarathustra) wishes his teaching to remain at least partially hidden or obscured from view. For *that* interpretation there is ample support, not in some one place only, be it in *Zarathustra* or elsewhere, as Munch appears to mean, but in a number of Nietzsche's writings, especially the later ones: see, for instance, A. Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), esp. "Appendix: A Chronological Compilation of Testimonial Evidence for Esotericism," [https://press.uchicago.edu/sites/melzer/melzer\\_appendix.pdf](https://press.uchicago.edu/sites/melzer/melzer_appendix.pdf), 92–94; L. Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 306–10, 342; and Brandes, *Nietzsche*, 51–52.

The true but partially obscured meaning of Munch's description could hence be that Nietzsche communicates his teaching ("the light") in a way that keeps it hidden ("in shadow") especially from those who cannot understand and benefit from it, which is to say that he practices a form of esotericism. If, then, what Munch is up to here, is conveying the fact of Nietzschean esotericism in a manner that involves a measure of deception and dissembling, as I tentatively suggest, it would seem to follow that he is imitating his philosophical hero in this respect, too, and thereby affirming his own need for and recourse to esotericism, in his writings as well as his artwork. One of the merits of this line of argument is that it offers some concrete textual support for the general point about Munch's esotericism made by Svenaeus and others.

<sup>35</sup> "In 1938, between the two World Wars, Munch was questioned by the Norwegian art-historian Harry Fett as to the meaning of his Nietzsche-portrait. Munch, who seldom explained his art, answered that he had tried to depict the man who predicted it all—past tragedies, and the tragedies about to arrive. In 1940, at the outbreak of World War II, Munch told his cousin Ludvig Ravensberg that the Germans had gone mad seeing themselves as 'Over-humans,' ruling an 'Over-country'—his altered attitude bringing us back to the changed connotation of the Zarathustra symbols following the Nazi propaganda" (Hilde M. J. Rognerud, "Zarathustra-Nietzsche with Wings: Munch's Vision of a Modern Philosopher" [paper delivered at the conference "Munch and Modernity," University of Oslo, Jan. 12, 2012], <https://www.academia.edu/4957419/>). According to this comment, then, the Nazi abuse of the idea of the Übermensch may have changed Munch's attitude towards certain aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy late in his life. Rognerud does not say or imply that the idea had no appeal to Munch or no influence on his artwork earlier, say, before the Great War. In fact, his use of the phrase "altered attitude" taken in context suggests the contrary. Note, too, the comment's support for the

For all of the reasons given above, I incline towards the view that he was not only sympathetic to the idea, but that it figured prominently, albeit at times quietly or indirectly, in a significant portion of his artwork, notwithstanding the difficulty of pinning down his notion of the *Übermensch*.

MUNCH'S "ZARATHUSTRIAN" PAINTINGS:  
THE *FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE* PORTRAIT

Moving to the 1906 *Friedrich Nietzsche* portrait, the catalog explains that in 1905 Munch was commissioned by Ernst Thiel, a wealthy Swedish industrialist and Nietzsche admirer, to do a portrait of Nietzsche. After careful deliberation on and growing dissatisfaction with the idea of portraying Nietzsche in an ailing and melancholy state, Munch "discarded the idea and informed Forster-Nietzsche that he would instead paint Nietzsche as a Zarathustrian wanderer." What he ended up producing was something far more monumental, an oil painting described in the catalog as follows:

[The] towering figure of Nietzsche, in a contemporary black coat, rises in three-quarter length in the foreground. Totally absorbed in his thought, his expression is grave, almost terrifying. He is standing at a rail, silhouetted against the pulsating ornamental lines of the brightly colored landscape and a glistening midday sun. A highly stylized image, which fuses the heroic contemporary thinker with the solitary Zarathustrian wanderer. (34)<sup>36</sup>

Schütze clearly perceives the painting's connection to Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, but a good deal more remains to be done if we are to consolidate that connection and adequately illuminate the Nietzschean meaning of the painting.<sup>37</sup>

---

view that Munch was reluctant to speak candidly and plainly about the meaning of his art; in conjunction with Munch's explicit acknowledgment of such reticence in "Edvard Munch: Notes," in Lampe and Chéroux, *Edvard Munch: The Modern Eye*, 53.

<sup>36</sup> The spirit of the painting and a fair bit of its detail fit rather well with the following passage concerning Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*: "Clear sky above, open sea at the mountain's foot, and over all a heaven of light, an abyss of light, an azure bell, a vaulted silence above the roaring waters and mighty mountain-chains. On the heights Zarathustra is alone with himself, drawing in the pure air in full deep breaths, alone with the rising sun, alone with the heat of noon, which does not impair the freshness, alone with the voices of the gleaming stars at night. / A good, deep book it is. A book that is bright in its joy of life, dark in its riddles, a book for spiritual mountain-climbers and dare-devils and for the few who are practised in the great contempt of man that loathes the crowd, and in the great love of man that only loathes so deeply because it has a vision of a higher, braver humanity, which it seeks to rear and train" (Brandes, *Nietzsche*, 45). At any rate, the fit seems close enough to make one wonder whether this passage, especially its first part (preceding the forward slash), might not have had some influence on Munch when he imagined and worked on the portrait. That the fit with the second part is also close should become apparent from my further discussion of the portrait.

<sup>37</sup> Besides the 1906 portrait of Nietzsche in oil and the 1905–6 portrait of Nietzsche in colored chalk,

Take for instance the railing Nietzsche is leaning against. What is this supposed to be the railing of? In a letter to Thiel,<sup>38</sup> Munch indicates that it is of a veranda outside his cave on which “Zarathustra’s poet” is standing. Yet it may also be taken to be the railing of a bridge, or at least of something strongly reminiscent of a bridge. Speaking in illusionistic terms, the railing appears too long to be one of an ordinary veranda; it seems comparable in length to the railing of the bridge in Munch’s *Scream*;<sup>39</sup> as Prideaux maintains, the railings in both paintings “[run] diagonally across the canvas into infinity.”<sup>40</sup> This same property of both railings suggests that what we are looking at in the *Nietzsche* portrait is something very bridge-like, resembling the bridge in *The Scream*. This interpretation gains further credence from Prideaux’s point that the *Nietzsche* portrait is strikingly similar in composition to *The Scream*.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps equally germane is the fact that, when speaking, in a celebrated and much scrutinized prose text,<sup>42</sup> of a certain state of mind on his part which came to be expressed in *The Scream*, Munch refers to its putative bridge as a “road” and not a bridge, yet this has nevertheless not prevented commentators from interpreting the road as a “bridge”—rightly so, in my opinion.<sup>43</sup> Given that in the letter to Thiel Munch also explicitly grants wide

---

both three-quarter length, Munch produced a third three-quarter length portrait of Nietzsche, also oil on canvas, which he kept for himself (*New Weimar*, 33–34). Except where explicitly otherwise indicated, all of what is said below about the 1906 *Nietzsche* portrait applies also to these other two portraits.

<sup>38</sup> Munch to Thiel, December 29, 1905, quoted in Heller, *Munch*, 188. Here is the relevant passage from the letter: “I have chosen to paint him [Nietzsche] monumentally and decoratively. I do not think it would be right for me to present him illusionistically, since I have never seen him with my *outer* eye. Therefore I have indicated my point of view by painting him over life-size. I have depicted him as Zarathustra’s poet among mountains in his lair; he stands on his veranda and looks down into a valley while the sun rises over the mountains. One can think of the place [in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*] where he speaks of standing in the light but wishing to be in shadow, but it is also possible to think of much else.”

<sup>39</sup> For that matter, the railing in the 1905–6 chalk portrait of Nietzsche looks still more like the railing of the bridge in *The Scream* than do the railings in the two Nietzsche portraits in oil spoken of above. For rather like *The Scream*’s railing, which possesses three distinguishable, long-looking horizontal beams, it has two such beams, whereas the railing in each of the two Nietzsche oils has only one. Furthermore, Munch does not identify the railing in the chalk drawing as that of a balcony or veranda; he seems to leave open the possibility of thinking of it as the railing of a bridge, therewith encouraging us to think of the railing in the other portraits in the same way.

<sup>40</sup> Prideaux, *I Am Dynamite!*, 370. In this respect the so-called veranda in the Nietzsche portrait contrasts starkly with the explicitly indicated finite dimensions and closed structures of the verandas in Munch’s “veranda” paintings, e.g., *On the Veranda* (1902).

<sup>41</sup> Prideaux, *Behind the Scream*, 232. Her point is, of course, equally applicable to the other three-quarter length portraits of Nietzsche.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in R. Heller, “‘Could Only Have Been Painted by a Madman’—Or Could It?,” in McShine, *Munch*, 18. Heller describes the text as a “prose poem” (19).

<sup>43</sup> See M. B. Guleng, “The Narratives of *The Frieze of Life*: Edvard Munch’s Picture Series,” in Guleng,

hermeneutical latitude towards the *Nietzsche* portrait, I propose here to treat the railing contained in it as belonging to or also signifying a bridge, thereby making it “possible to think of much else,” as Munch says,<sup>44</sup> when interpreting the painting’s meaning.

But now, if we compare the “bridge” in the *Nietzsche* portrait with the bridges in some of Munch’s other oil paintings, for instance, the *Ladies on the Bridge* (1902, 1903, 1934–40) and *Girls on the Bridge* (1901, 1901, 1902, 1927), we immediately recognize that this is no ordinary bridge. The other bridges are much closer to the ground, and pass over readily recognizable rivers or streams from one bank which one can clearly see in the background to the bank on the other side which one has no trouble imagining being in the foreground. Thus they seem intended to be taken literally, as real-life bridges. Not so with the bridge in the *Nietzsche* portrait. This one strikes us as being far more elevated, very much higher above the ground, as though crossing over to an extraordinarily high and distant place we cannot see and have difficulty imagining. One indication of this is the almost miniaturized human settlement visible in the distant background, far behind and below the figure of Nietzsche himself in the foreground.

Moreover (as in the case of the bridge in *The Scream* [1893, 1910?, oil and tempera], *Anxiety* [ca. 1894, oil], and *Sick Mood at Sunset. Despair* [1892, oil]), it is not exactly clear what is beneath the bridge, what it is supposed to be a bridge *over*, which suggests that it is a metaphor, or has symbolic meaning.<sup>45</sup> One cannot help having the thought that the crossing-over signified by this bridge is something on a much larger, grander scale, at a far greater height (in a nonphysical, metaphorical sense of *scale* and *height*), than the ordinary, physical crossing-over of any real-life bridge.

---

Sauge, and Steihaug, *Munch 1863–1944*, 131, 135. Note, too, the structural similarities between the “bridge” in *The Scream* and those in Munch’s other paintings with bridges, e.g., the *Ladies on the Bridge* (1902, 1903, 1934–40) and *Girls on the Bridge* (1901, 1901, 1902, 1927).

<sup>44</sup> For the relevant passage in its entirety, see note 38 above.

<sup>45</sup> Guleng too notes the symbolic meaning of the bridge in some of Munch’s artwork, e.g., *Angst* and *Scream*. Drawing upon the writings of Russian literary critic M. M. Bakhtin, he suggests that in such paintings the bridge symbolizes some major threshold, transition, or transformation in an individual’s psychic life (“Narratives of *The Frieze of Life*,” in Guleng, Sauge, and Steihaug, *Munch 1863–1944*, 131, 132, 134–35). Guleng overlooks the possibility that the symbolic meaning of the bridge in Munch’s Nietzsche portraits may well be related to its metaphorical meaning in Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. In fairness to him, this could be because, like everyone else and unlike us, he does not pause to consider that the railing in the portraits might also signify a bridge. This, of course, would not explain his failure to consider the possibility of interpreting the symbolic meaning of the bridge in *Angst*, *Despair*, and *Scream* in relation to the bridge metaphor in *Zarathustra*: see notes 49 and 50 below.

What, then, is all of this symbolism supposed to mean? The key to the answer may be in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In the fourth section of the prologue to the philosophical novel, Zarathustra the prophet says that man is “a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an overture and a going under.” He seems to mean by this that humankind is transitional,<sup>46</sup> at its best pointing toward, paving the way for, and ultimately giving way to something presumably higher, nobler. But what precisely is this transition from and to? If Zarathustra’s invocation of the tightrope metaphor for humankind a few lines earlier in the text is any indication, it is a transition from beast to Übermensch. It is in this light that the rest of the fourth section of the Prologue is to be interpreted. Zarathustra loves not all of humanity, after the fashion of universalizing nineteenth-century philanthropists, but only those human beings who are capable of contributing to the advent of the Übermensch (and thereby, as the fifth section of the Prologue makes abundantly clear, preventing the rise of the utterly contemptible Last Man). To be more concrete, he loves those among us who are “great despisers because they are great reverers and arrows of longing for the other shore,” and who “work and invent” to build a proper home for the Übermensch to live in or seek knowledge needful to the Übermensch; those who are willing to sacrifice all for the sake of their virtue, or who have a great soul, “a free spirit and a free heart,” and the like. The bridge is a metaphor for all such higher human types.<sup>47</sup>

Assuming the foregoing to be more or less in line with Munch’s reading of the Prologue, one possible interpretation of his *Nietzsche* portrait is as follows. The side at the end of the bridge that Nietzsche is facing, but which we viewers do not see, symbolizes a way of life bound up with the existence and flourishing of the Übermensch. Far behind and beneath Nietzsche is humankind at its lowest and smallest, the self-satisfied, complacent, soulless, “flea-beetle” bourgeois, signified by the minuscule human city far off in the distance and way below Nietzsche, from which he has turned away. Here, as

---

<sup>46</sup> The meaning of “transitional” here need not be strictly tied to any theory of evolution. But to the extent that Nietzsche has in mind some such theory, it need not be Darwin’s.

<sup>47</sup> In the fourth part of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche speaks explicitly of the higher men as “bridges” over whom still higher men will stride, thus heralding the coming of the Übermensch, and among those higher men he includes men “of great longing, of great nausea, of great disgust,” “the great despisers [who] are the great reverers,” men who “have despaired,” etc.; in the first part he indicates that lower types of humanity such as “despisers of the body...are no bridge to the overman.” See *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 395, 399, and 147 respectively; cf. 379. These passages taken together strongly suggest that, when using the “bridge” as a metaphor for “man,” Nietzsche’s Zarathustra means only a portion of humankind, the noblest portion at that. Cf. Brandes’s remark: “The State is for the many too many. Only where the State leaves off does *the man who is not superfluous begin; the man who is a bridge to the Superman*” (*Nietzsche*, 46, emphasis added).

in the *Towards the Light* lithograph (and possibly also the sun-related paintings in the Oslo cycle), the sun symbolizes the advent of a new era, the era of the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche uses as a bridge on which to stand or walk across, so to speak, the higher human types who can assist him in effecting a crossing-over to the side of the *Übermensch*. The rest of humanity—with its traditional religion, as symbolized by the church in the city<sup>48</sup>—is left behind; in other words, it is no longer of any interest or concern to Nietzsche.

As to the Zarathustra-like Nietzsche himself, it is not entirely clear what happens to him. Does he succeed in crossing over, or is he left standing in one spot, intensely contemplating the other side (as the catalog seems to intimate) but not being able to make it there? On the basis of my earlier remarks on possible Munchian ideas around the *Übermensch* and the features in some of his artwork which suggest that in his view Nietzsche *was* an *Übermensch*, the portrait might be taken to indicate the former. Yet the contrary interpretation—that he does not cross over—is also plausible. For one thing, the deeply troubled look on Nietzsche's face in the painting is not easy to square with his doctrine of *amor fati* as a mark of the *Übermensch*.<sup>49</sup> If it does not, then

<sup>48</sup> Strawser aptly describes it as “the tomb of God” (“Dionysian Painting,” 171). In *Joyful Wisdom*, aph. 125, Nietzsche has the madman conjuring an image of churches as “die Grüfte und Grabmäler Gottes” (the crypts and tombs of God).

<sup>49</sup> Munch also produced some lithographic crayons “restricted to the bust [of Nietzsche],” which he “printed in different color variants.” The 1906 lithographic crayon bust reproduced in the catalog is in “greyish-violet and red.” Schütze says: “The head, drawn with powerful essential lines, is surrounded by pulsating sunrays which accentuate the drama of the heroic solitary thinker” (*New Weimar*, 110–11). I would add that this bust underscores the 1906 Nietzsche portrait's portrayal of the “hard” but troubled intensity of the thinker as he contemplates profound albeit in part deeply unsettling radical truths also symbolized by the rising sun—such as prophecies of planetary wars resulting in the deaths of untold millions, and the wide diffusion of a spiritually utterly debilitating nihilism, that will precede or accompany the advent of the *Übermensch*. This interpretation gains further support from the 1905 half-length portrait in chalk of Nietzsche also featured in the catalog. As Schütze explains, like one of Gustav Adolf Schultze's 1882 photographs of Nietzsche on which it is based, the chalk drawing depicts him “in a melancholic pose”; seated, his head propped up on his elbow, Nietzsche is clearly lost in disquieting thought (*ibid.*, 80–81, 108–9). See also the point in note 35 above regarding Munch's professed attempt to convey in his 1906 Nietzsche portrait a sense of “the man who predicted” the great “tragedies” to come.

Here a further comparison between the 1906 Nietzsche portrait and *The Scream* may be useful. Assuming for the sake of argument the meaning of the “bridge” symbol as I interpret it above, one might infer that, like Nietzsche in the former work, the protagonist in the latter too is facing toward the other side of the bridge, that is, the future. Yet he senses and feels some of the terrifying “existential” consequences of the death of God (signified by the blurred, barely discernible shape of the church [“the tomb of God,” in Strawser's words] far in the distance) to the point of total emotional devastation. Nietzsche, on the other hand, although aware of those consequences, can accept them as a transitional necessity and “see” past them to a higher possibility; he is thus pained but not emotionally devastated by them. As his “erect and powerful,” comparatively “calm,” and unwavering posture might be taken to suggest (consider the quotations from Heller cited in note 51 below), perhaps he can even embrace such a pain-ridden time of transition as part of his *amor fati*. If so, then maybe Munch's

Nietzsche, perhaps like the Zarathustra of his novel, can at best be only one of the highest and most lovable of human beings: one who, through his quest for the prophetic knowledge and wisdom so powerfully expressed in his artful writings, has contributed to the advent of the *Übermensch*, but who cannot himself become an *Übermensch* and therefore must ultimately—tragically, one is tempted to say—“go under,” like the other noble human types signified by the downward-sloping bridge.<sup>50</sup>

Of course we cannot be certain of the validity of the foregoing interpretation of Munch’s *Nietzsche* portrait. With many a painting it is exceedingly difficult to find the mean between the excess of overinterpretation and the deficiency of underinterpretation.<sup>51</sup> If err we must, we may choose to err on

---

Nietzsche is, in the final analysis, capable of “crossing over” after all. Nevertheless, I am at present undecided on this point.

Whether or not Nietzsche ever thought of himself as having finally become an *Übermensch* must for now remain an open question. One item of evidence for the affirmative comes from the fourth part of *Ecce Homo*, entitled “Why I Am a Destiny,” where Nietzsche says of himself, “I am *no man*, I am dynamite” (in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. W. Kaufmann [New York: Modern Library, 1968], 782, emphasis added).

<sup>50</sup> In light of what Nietzsche says in *Zarathustra* about the higher men as bridges to the *Übermensch* (see note 47 above), the screaming figure depicted in Munch’s *Scream* too might be included among Nietzsche’s higher men, hence a “bridge” in the Nietzschean, metaphorical sense of the word, as signified by the bridge on which he is shown standing in the painting. Perhaps he too is destined to “go under.” This interpretation is given additional credence by the plausibility of regarding *The Scream* as a “painting of the dilemma of modern man, a visualization of Nietzsche’s cry, ‘God is dead, and we have nothing to replace him,’” as Prideaux suggests (*Behind the Scream*, 151, emphasis added; cf. Strawser, “Dionysian Painting,” 170). A similar line of interpretation seems applicable to such paintings as *Anxiety* and *Sick Mood at Sunset*. *Despair*, all of which, we recall, contain bridges.

<sup>51</sup> A somewhat different interpretation is put forward by Reinhold Heller: “With Nietzsche [in the *Nietzsche* portrait] he [i.e., Munch] purposely sought to say ‘yes’ to life, to deny death’s shadowy adherence to life. Unlike the figure of *The Scream*, Nietzsche stands erect and powerful as he looks out across the precipice and landscape before him; calmly he surveys it and accepts it, unaffected by the dizzying aftermath of his thoughts, by the destruction of all values. And the diagonal of the railing moves upward, an affirming and hopeful movement according to the interpretations of linear motion made during the nineteenth century. The Nietzsche portrait serves essentially as an antithesis to *The Scream*, as an idealized self-portrait as Munch longed to be rather than the true spiritual self-portrait of *The Scream*” (*Edvard Munch: The Scream* [New York: Viking, 1973], 96, 99). And: “[It] is possible to view the Nietzsche portrait as an idyllic self-portrait or a representation of Munch’s return to health. The composition [in the *Nietzsche* portrait] of the figure standing near a railing and overlooking a valley landscape is dependent on *The Scream*. With its lines descending from left to right as a metaphor for his anxiety, however, *The Scream* is emotionally the antithesis of the firm stability and calm projected by the Nietzsche painting’s monumental forms. Nietzsche is not overcome by the sunset or the dizzying perspective of the precipice, but calmly surveys and accepts it” (*Munch: His Life and Work*, 189). Sharon Jordan offers yet another, even more different interpretation: “In the portrait, the philosopher stands on a bridge with his hands crossed in thoughtful repose as he gazes towards a nearby town, with the bands of color in the surrounding landscape uniting man, nature, and society in harmony” (Jordan, “‘He Is a Bridge’: The Importance of Friedrich Nietzsche for Ernst Ludwig Kirchner,” in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, ed. J. Lloyd and J. Staggs [New York: Prestel, 2019], 92). Although thought-provoking, like Schütze’s, these two interpretations of the painting may strike some of its

the side of excess; for, to adapt what a noted Machiavelli scholar says about reading great writers, such an interpretive approach shows generosity towards the artist, by proceeding on the assumption that everything in the painting is there for a reason (even if for the artist it remains at the level of unconceptualized intuition) and serves some aesthetic and ideational purpose.

#### NIETZSCHE AND MUNCH'S *SELF-PORTRAIT WITH LYRE*<sup>52</sup>

Turning now to Munch's *Self-Portrait with Lyre* (1897, pencil and gouache on paper), here too what the catalog says about its connection to Nietzsche is of great interest, more so since the work itself has thus far received remarkably little attention, much less its Nietzschean aspects. I quote:

In his 1897 *Self-Portrait with Lyre*, Munch takes on the role of a prophet and singer emphatically embracing his lyre. Reminiscent of initials of illuminated medieval manuscripts, his half-length figure is inscribed into a dark green frame. The closed eyes underline the intensity of the spiritual experience, the emaciated physiognomy, the hair tinted in red and the blood drops on the neck indicate his extreme suffering. Here Munch identifies himself with the suffering Christ as much as with the genius of Nietzsche who, due to the infernal truth of his insights, ended in derangement. Like an ancient prophet, the artist becomes an oracle through which the higher truth is communicated, a kind of suffering medium of the existential drama of modern life. (106)

The catalog's comments on this self-portrait, though highly suggestive, are perhaps the least satisfying part of Schütze's treatment of the Nietzschean influence on Munch's artwork. It is exhilarating to read that this self-portrait manifests Munch's self-identification "with the genius of Nietzsche" (106; cf. 33), but Schütze does not explain how he has arrived at this conclusion. To do so, he would have had to discuss, even if only briefly, Nietzsche's notion of a

---

thoughtful viewers well acquainted with Nietzsche's philosophy as examples of underinterpretation.

<sup>52</sup> In taking up his works of art out of chronological order (e.g., *Self-Portrait with Lyre* predates the 1906 *Nietzsche* portrait by almost a decade, while *Towards the Light* was done eight years later), I am, admittedly, abstracting from the very real possibility that Munch's understanding of and attitude towards Nietzsche's philosophy may have undergone substantial development during that time. My rationale for doing so is a simple methodological one. I wish to postpone my attempt to make a connection between Nietzsche's thought and the Expressionist style of certain of Munch's works until after shedding light on the Nietzschean themes of his most famous Nietzschean works, especially his 1905–6 portraits of the philosopher. A more comprehensive treatment of the Nietzschean aspects of Munch's artwork as a whole would take that "developmental" possibility into account. No such treatment is attempted here, however; I have instead adopted the more limited approach of building on the discussion of Munch's works of art contained in the *New Weimar* catalog. Accordingly, it suffices for me to show that those works (and other directly related ones by Munch also brought up along the way) bespeak a marked Nietzschean influence.

“musical metaphysics,” as well as its influence on the Expressionist strand of modernist art, especially as exemplified in the artwork of Munch.

Nietzsche first elaborated this idea of a musical metaphysics in the *Birth of Tragedy*, in conjunction with his account of the Apollonian-Dionysian distinction; he modified it in later works such as *Zarathustra*, *Twilight of the Idols*, and *Ecce Homo*. Here is not the place to explore in detail this fascinating but highly complex and elusive aspect of Nietzsche’s thought. A brief, unavoidably schematic indication of the main lines along which such an exploration would have to proceed must suffice.

#### APOLLONIAN AND DIONYSIAN: NIETZSCHE’S *BIRTH OF TRAGEDY*

According to the *Birth of Tragedy*, there are two realms of nature. The first is the realm of heterogeneous phenomena or appearances, all under the sway of the principle of individuation. What we ordinarily perceive as individual entities, namely, humans, dogs, cats, birds, bees, flowers, trees, and so forth, are such phenomena, governed in their appearance by the principle of individuation.

The second is the one, all-encompassing reality underlying the realm of phenomena or appearances, their metaphysical “essence,” which Nietzsche, following Schopenhauer, conceives of as the primal Will. It is this Will that is truly real, not the individual phenomena, which are themselves mere shadows, dream-like “objectifications” of the Will. Calling to mind the ancient Greek notion of Eros, Schopenhauer sought to illumine the Will by analogy with human mental life, especially its willing and affective or passional aspects. He pictured this fundamental reality as a blind, ceaseless, insatiable striving, which in human life manifests itself as birth, joy, sorrow, hope, fear, suffering, and death.<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche invokes for this primordial Will the metaphor, coined by Schopenhauer, of a vast ocean made turbulent by a raging storm, its individual waves rising, surging, swelling upwards, cresting, then crashing against one another, falling and merging into the ocean, in a ceaseless cycle of appearing and vanishing. A second metaphor Nietzsche invokes is that of a “playing child that places stones here and there and builds sand hills only to overthrow them again,” its pleasure unabated. Like those waves and sand hills, all individual existence proves to be highly unstable,

---

<sup>53</sup> That what is said here about Schopenhauer’s philosophy as enunciated in the latter’s *World as Will and Representation* is basically in accord with the interpretation of the work given in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is evident from a comparison of Schopenhauer’s work with Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 35–36, 55–56, 99–100, 101–4, 112, 120.

ephemeral, the whole idea of enduring individuality, nay, the principle of individuation itself, profoundly illusory, mere appearance or dream—Maya, according to ancient Hindu wisdom.<sup>54</sup>

Now, for Schopenhauer as for the early Nietzsche, the realm of phenomena is knowable by science, whereas the Will is noumenal, in the Kantian sense of *noumenon*, and thus inaccessible to reason, science, or philosophy. We do, however, have a kind of nonrational cognitive access to the Will through our own individual subjectivity, especially our passions, because of the passion-like nature of the Will.

The category of art corresponding to the phenomenal realm of nature Nietzsche labels Apollonian, and the kinds of art belonging to this category are painting, sculpture, architecture, and epic poetry, for instance, Homer. Apollonian art can be said to be a celebration of individual existence in its ideal perceptible form, or individuality at its apparently stable best and most beautiful. An example would be the ancient Athenian sculptor Myron's *Discus Thrower*, which depicts an ideal human being, a beautiful-looking man of noble bearing, executing a feat of outstanding athletic excellence. Nevertheless, since for its material Apollonian art draws from the realm of heterogeneous appearances or phenomena, which is ultimately but a dream world, it can beget only beautiful illusions.<sup>55</sup>

The artistic tendency corresponding to the primal Will, on the other hand, is best exemplified in such forms of art as music and dance. Nietzsche labels this tendency and those forms of art Dionysian. Here he draws on ancient Greek mythical thought, which casts Dionysus as the god of intoxication (self-transcendence, *ecstasis*) through wine, music, dance, but also through all overpowering emotions, including violent, destructive passion and erotic desire.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> See, for instance, Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 35–36, 55, 100, 101–4, 141–42, and *passim*.

<sup>55</sup> Why Apollonian? Apollo, an Olympian god, is a paragon of beauty of outward form. He is also the god of healing, hence of preserving, safeguarding individual existence: see, for instance, Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 35–36, 45–46, 128.

<sup>56</sup> Nietzsche concomitantly invokes the ancient Greek idea of Dionysus as the god of *both* creation *and* destruction; he recalls that in ancient Greek myth, Dionysus is himself destroyed—torn apart by the Titans—and subsequently reborn. All this makes him, in Nietzsche's view, a fitting embodiment of the primordial Will in its ecstatic, passion-like nature, the one, all-encompassing, fundamental reality underlying the realm of phenomena in their seeming heterogeneity and fleeting, dream-like existence: see, for instance, Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 36–38, 45–46, 73–74, 103–4.

The point to underscore here is that for Nietzsche in his largely Schopenhauerian-Wagnerian *Birth of Tragedy*, music is the supreme art, the Dionysian art par excellence, because it is a direct expression or copy of the primal Will, that most fundamental and fully real stratum of being, which the god Dionysus embodies. In evoking our emotions and feelings in a way that we can apprehend subjectively, in a first-person way,<sup>57</sup> and therefore immediately, that is to say, without the mediation of objectifying concepts, a Beethoven string quartet puts us in immediate touch with the primal Will. Indeed it causes us to transcend our individual, physical selves and ecstatically lose ourselves in the oneness of the Will. Music can do this precisely because the Will is the metaphysical essence of what is central to our mental life, namely, our passions and emotions; they literally are that primal Will in its humanly objectified form. None of the other kinds of art has that capacity, because none has that sort of direct channel to the fundamental, metaphysical reality. Their access to it is at best indirect, mediated either by visual imagery, as in the case of the visual arts, or by words, as in the case of poetry. For the Nietzsche of *Birth of Tragedy*, as for Schopenhauer, music really is metaphysics. And it is so in a twofold sense. Music is a truer metaphysics than the logos-based metaphysics of philosophers from Plato to Hegel. It is also metaphysics in the sense that it induces the transcendence of our particular self and union with our metaphysical essence adumbrated above.

#### APOLLONIAN AND DIONYSIAN: NIETZSCHE'S LATER WRITINGS

Nietzsche's philosophy underwent considerable change from the time of writing *Birth of Tragedy* to his final works. For instance, he later abandoned the Schopenhauerian metaphysical distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal realms of nature, and he replaced Schopenhauer's primordial Will (which in the domain of animate things manifests itself as the will to live) with the "will to power." Accordingly, his way of conceiving the Apollonian-Dionysian distinction was bound to change as well, though how exactly it changed is difficult to tell. One thing seems certain: Nietzsche remained a disciple of Dionysus to the end. Moreover, although he finally, *pace* the earlier Nietzsche, identified the Dionysian character of reality with "becoming," heterogeneity, many-ness, the sense-perceptible realm of the here and now or Heraclitean flux, he continued to depict it in terms of the metaphor of

---

<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 50–52, 99–100. For an explanation of this Schopenhauerian-Wagnerian conception of music as a kind of first-person or subjective knowledge, which Nietzsche appears to adopt here, see Roger Scruton, *The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelung"* (London: Penguin Random House, 2016), 51–52.

the child at play, “beyond good and evil,” joyfully ceaselessly creating and destroying.<sup>58</sup> Most important, he held fast to the “aletheist”<sup>59</sup> view of music as having the greatest truth-value or the greatest capacity to reveal reality, such as it is.<sup>60</sup> In Heideggerian idiom, for the later as for the earlier Nietzsche, music is the “house of Being.”

#### NIETZSCHE’S APOLLONIAN-DIONYSIAN DISTINCTION AND EXPRESSIONISM IN THE VISUAL ARTS

As various historians of art and culture have noted, the Apollonian-Dionysian distinction seems to have made a strong impression on many modernist visual artists.<sup>61</sup> Where a goodly number of these artists appear to have parted company with Nietzsche is over his view that the Dionysian artistic impulse is expressible only in music, lyric poetry, Attic tragedy, and dance. In their understanding (often perhaps more implicit than explicitly articulated) the visual, plastic arts are not solely the domain of Apollo; Dionysus too can have a share in them, even a major share. About those artists it may plausibly be said that they strove to achieve, in the realm of visual arts, the optimal fusion of Apollonian and Dionysian, paralleling the balance Nietzsche claimed had been attained in ancient Greek lyric poetry and tragedy and was in his time being attained in the music-dramas of Richard Wagner.<sup>62</sup> (One might add that they were supported in this endeavor by the fact that Nietzsche himself, in *Birth of Tragedy*, gives examples of paintings with Dionysian aspects to

<sup>58</sup> See, for instance, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. K. Ansell-Pearson, trans. C. Diethe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 62; *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 328, 348; *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 729–30; and *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 484–86, 554, 562.

<sup>59</sup> “Aletheist” derives from the ancient Greek word *alētheia*, which is usually translated in English as “truth” and which Heidegger interprets as unconcealment (more accurately, in terms of the interplay of concealment and unconcealment).

<sup>60</sup> For a penetrating, thought-provoking recent treatment of the intimate connection between music and philosophy in Nietzsche’s thought, see M. A. Gillespie, *Nietzsche’s Final Teaching* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), especially the essays titled “Nietzsche’s Musical Politics” and “Life as Music: Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo*.”

<sup>61</sup> See Marja Lahelma, “Ideal and Disintegration: Dynamics of the Self and Art at the Fin-de-Siècle” (diss., University of Helsinki, 2014); Diethe, *A to Z of Nietzscheanism*, 87, 190, 307, and passim; F. Ulfers and M. D. Cohen, “Nietzsche and the Future of Art,” *Hyperion* 2, no. 4 (2007): 2–3, and passim; W. and I. Henze, *Kirchner* (London: Grange Books, 2005), 112; Short, “Nietzsche and German Expressionist Art”; Aschheim, *Nietzsche Legacy*; and F. R. Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist 1885–1925* (New York: Atheneum-Macmillan, 1985), 119–20.

<sup>62</sup> It is an open question how much their understanding of Nietzsche’s Apollonian-Dionysian distinction was mediated by their encounter with the musico-dramatic art of Richard Wagner. Munch, for instance, considered Wagner one of the greatest musicians (Heller, *Munch*, 109).

them, such as Raphael's *Transfiguration*.)<sup>63</sup> It is in this context that Beckmann's comment about wanting to create "painterly music" and his motto of "disciplined rapture" are best interpreted, as Hans Belting has aptly pointed out;<sup>64</sup> likewise perhaps with other artists who sensed art's kinship to music or saw themselves as seeking to make their art "musical," such as Munch, Kandinsky, Delaunay, Klee, Macke, and Matisse.<sup>65</sup> It is as though these artists had taken to heart, while interpreting, each in his own Nietzschean way, Walter Pater's famous dictum that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music."<sup>66</sup>

Of course, since arts such as painting and sculpture naturally dwell in the element of visual form and heterogeneity, giving expression to the Apollonian tendency was never an issue for them. The challenge was to find a plastic-visual way to do justice, or pay homage, to Dionysus, albeit a way that does not deny Apollo his due.

This objective could be achieved in part by focusing on the emotionally evocative, expressive powers of formal elements of art such as line, color, and shape. It has long been known (or believed) that these formal elements possess evocative powers independent of their use to create realistic images of objects recognizable from everyday life.<sup>67</sup> Such powers (the argument goes) come into

<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 45. Note also his exhortation to visual artists in the first section of *Birth*: "Transform Beethoven's 'Hymn to Joy' into a painting; let your imagination conceive the multitudes bowing to the dust, awestruck—then you will approach the Dionysian" (37).

<sup>64</sup> Hans Belting, *Max Beckmann: Tradition as a Problem in Modern Art*, trans. P. Wortsman (New York: Timken, 1989), 52–53.

<sup>65</sup> For Munch, see Przybyszewski, "Munch," in Nielsen, *Vigeland and Munch*, 87, 89; Prideaux, *Behind the Scream*, 105, 129, 180–81; and J. Howe, "Nocturnes," in *Psyche, Symbol and Expression*, 51–59, 65; for Kandinsky, Delaunay, Klee, and Macke, see H. Düchting, *Paul Klee: Painting Music* (New York: Prestel, 2004); for Matisse, see Ursula Rehn Wolfman, "Henri Matisse and the Music of Color," *Interlude*, June 11, 2017, <https://interlude.hk/henri-matisse-music-color/>; and Walter Guadagnini, *Matisse*, trans. Richard Pierce (Edison, NJ: Chartwell Books, 1993), 23–24.

<sup>66</sup> Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 124.

<sup>67</sup> "Studies on the relationship between music and painting can be traced back to ancient history and are closely linked to the comparison between musical keys and shades of color. The development of this analogy gained impetus from the Romantic movement, which saw in music the other-worldly ideal of spiritual purity, as yet unattained in painting. Searching for a common source for the arts, [Ludwig] Tieck and [Wilhelm H.] Wackenroder dreamt of a vaguely defined 'poetical' quality that could be achieved in painting and instrumental music, by eliminating the imitative principle and replacing it with the free use of colors and forms" (Düchting, *Klee: Painting Music*, 12–13).

Also instructive on this point is Laurie Schneider Adams, who links the Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy in painting to the quarrel between the "Ancients" and the "Moderns." According to her, the Ancients, proponents of *disegno*, considered line to be the most important formal element of painting, in that it was "rational, controlled, and Apollonian," whereas the Moderns, champions of

play more fully when the use of those formal elements is tailored to expressiveness rather than to mimesis. In the context of figurative painting this approach entails distortion of the represented objects' shapes, colors, lines, or contours or some combination of these features.<sup>68</sup> Only thus can their emotional impact be maximized or their "orgiastic potential"<sup>69</sup> fully actualized. Speaking in terms of style, what this adds up to is *Expressionism* in the original, more inclusive or ecumenical sense of the term,<sup>70</sup> the chief aim of which is not an appeal to reason, as in naturalist art in its Classicist, Neo-classical, or Realist varieties, but the arousal of some strong, even overpowering passion. As one contemporary poet commenting on early twentieth-century Expressionist café culture wrote, "More than anything else, van Gogh, Nietzsche, and also Freud and Wedekind, were in the air. A *post-rational Dionysus was saught* [sic]."<sup>71</sup> One need not gaze long at Munch's *Scream* or *Sun* paintings to sense the onset of a state of mind marked by "ecstatic abandonment"<sup>72</sup> which they evidently are calculated to excite in the viewer. And it is precisely this broadly

---

*colorito*, valorized color as "emotional, exuberant, and related to Dionysiac expression" (*History of Western Art*, 340). Furthermore, the Apollonian-Dionysian distinction coincides, in her view, with the distinction between the *Poussinistes* and the *Rubénistes* (340), as well as that between Classicists as exemplified by Ingres, and Romanticists as exemplified by Delacroix (404). We may safely infer from her argument that she would slot Expressionism as construed here into the Dionysian category, in company with the Moderns, *Rubénistes*, and Romanticists: see 470ff. Of course, one key difference between the Expressionists and the Rubenists is that the former sought to tap the innate capacities of *all* the formal elements of art for emotional, exuberant, Dionysiac expression, at least to a greater extent than the Rubenists, who seemed primarily concerned with the expressive powers of color.

A brilliant philosophical account of the intrinsic expressive power of the formal elements of painting is provided by the French phenomenologist Michel Henry in *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, trans. S. Davidson (London: Continuum, 2009). In developing his account Henry leans heavily on the writings of Wassily Kandinsky, which he considers seminal in this area.

<sup>68</sup> For a clear and cogent exposition of this argument tied to developments in the visual arts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see W. R. Everdell, *The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), with emphasis on his discussions of the visual arts, especially painting.

<sup>69</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Diethel, *A to Z of Nietzscheanism*, 51.

<sup>70</sup> I.e., a sense that would include the Fauves, the Blaue Reiter group, Die Brücke, the Viennese and French Expressionists, Neue Sachlichkeit, etc. Max Ernst nicely captured the broader, more inclusive meaning of "Expressionism" when he wrote about an exhibition of modernist works of art near Bonn University in 1913, that it revealed "how a series of powers are at work within the great stream of Expressionism who have no outward similarity to one another but only a common 'direction' of thrust, namely the intention to give expression to things of the psyche (*Seelisches*) through form alone" (quoted in N. Wolf, *Expressionism* [Los Angeles: Taschen, 2004], 12). See also note 73 below.

<sup>71</sup> E. Blass, *Das alte Café des Westens*, quoted in Short, "Nietzsche and German Expressionist Art," section 2, "The Nietzsche Cult," subsection 2, "Periodicals, Literary Circles and the Broader Cultural Forum (Visual Expressionism and Literary Circles)," emphasis added. In the pages following this quotation Short goes on to establish the truth of Blass's assertion.

<sup>72</sup> This phrase too is borrowed from Diethel, *A to Z of Nietzscheanism*, 64.

Expressionist aspect of a work of art that makes it begin to approximate the condition of music in its intoxicating aspect (as Nietzsche characterized it) and thus accounts for its Dionysian tendency.<sup>73</sup>

#### NIETZSCHE'S APOLLONIAN-DIONYSIAN DISTINCTION AND MUNCH'S *SELF-PORTRAIT WITH LYRE*

We are now in a better position to illuminate the catalog's claim that Munch's *Self-Portrait with Lyre* is an artistic expression of his self-identification with Nietzsche. In portraying himself as a singer, as the catalog suggests, Munch indicates his receptiveness to Nietzsche's aletheistic view of music. He also expresses his belief in the basic affinity of painting to music. What is more, he appears to do so in a way that reflects what Nietzsche says about lyric poetry in *Birth of Tragedy*.

As indicated above, according to Nietzsche, in Hellenic culture the blending of the Apollonian and Dionysian artistic tendencies is not unique

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Short, "Nietzsche and German Expressionist Art," esp. section 3. Ulfers and Cohen seek to explain how the Dionysian natural tendency as articulated in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* points to the pure abstraction of artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, and Barnett Newman (as well as to the Cubism of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and others). The key to their explanation is that Dionysian truth, which subverts the Apollonian principle of individuation that underpins all representational art, realistic and nonrealistic, entails an antirepresentationalist aesthetic. True, Ulfers and Cohen acknowledge that Expressionists such as Edvard Munch and Otto Dix tipped their hats to Nietzsche ("Nietzsche and the Future of Art," 6). Nevertheless, in my view they might have gone further: they might have considered the possibility that their explanation is also applicable to those and other Expressionists, at least inasmuch as Expressionism eschews naturalistic, rationalistic mimesis and is therefore partly abstract. Indeed, there were quite a few artists, art critics, and art dealers in the first quarter of the twentieth century who held precisely that conception of Expressionism. A number of them went so far as to classify Cubism, Futurism, and the pure abstraction of Kandinsky *all* as types of Expressionism, alongside those of Die Brücke, Klee, Chagall, Matisse, Campendonck, Marc, etc.—as though the fact that some types were more abstract than others was of less consequence than what they had in common, the *rejection of illusionistic, mimetic, rationalist naturalism or realism*: see, for instance, the excerpts from essays or books by Max Deri, Adolph Behne, Rudolph Blumner, Paul Fechter, and G. F. Hartlaub, in the first two parts of *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*, ed. R.-C. Washton Long (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993). Cf. also W. and I. Henze, *Kirchner*, 12, 14; Wolf, *Expressionism*, 6; and W.-D. Dube, *The Expressionists*, trans. M. Whittall (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), 18–19. What is more, one could plausibly regard the more representational varieties of Expressionism evinced by Munch and Die Brücke artists, among others, as attempts to strike a balance between the Apollonian and the Dionysian which pure abstraction cannot achieve, because it tilts way too far towards the Dionysian. In this respect their artwork might be truer to Nietzsche's intention than the pure abstraction of Kandinsky, Pollock, and company. Such an argument would hold even if the artists in question did not always fully conceptualize their own endeavors in quite those terms. (All the same, I submit, as a hypothesis to be further tested [following Short's example], that a close analysis of their writings, as well as those of contemporary sympathetic critics and historians with whom they often interacted, would show that the Nietzschean Apollonian-Dionysian distinction had actually penetrated their thinking to a significant degree.)

to Attic tragedy; it also characterizes ancient Greek lyric poetry, for which the prototype was set by Archilochus. Nietzsche points out that the ancient Greeks “took for granted *the union*, indeed the *identity*, of the *lyrist with the musician*.”<sup>74</sup> For Nietzsche, when the lyrist sings his lyric poem, it is his metaphysical “I” or self, the primordial will in its “pain and contradiction,” that is doing the singing, not his spatio-temporally particularized, individual “I” or self: through the melodic and harmonic aspects of the lyric poem, the lyrist ecstatically transcends his empirical self and wholly identifies himself with his metaphysical self in all of its pain, suffering, and inner turmoil. This is the Dionysian element of the lyrist’s art. At the same time, the lyric poem’s melody and harmony are overlaid with words conveying beautiful dream images which particularize that “pain and contradiction” by localizing it in the lyrist’s individual, empirical self. These words and the corresponding beautiful dream-imagery of the lyric poet’s individual selfhood thus reflect the Apollonian aspect of the poem. Hence Nietzsche’s view that, like Attic tragedy, ancient Greek lyric poetry represents a fusion of the Apollonian and Dionysian artistic tendencies.

By portraying himself as a *lyrist* in this Nietzschean sense, Munch is evidently extending what Nietzsche says about lyric poetry in *Birth of Tragedy* to his own art, thereby establishing the basic affinity between the two. But he accomplishes this not only through the portrayal of himself, a visual artist, as a lyrist, but also through the proto-Expressionist style of the work, which, in its strongly Dionysian tendency, is the plastic-visual counterpart to the ecstatic, musical aspect of Archilochian lyric poetry. Munch, then, very likely at least partly inspired thereto by some of Nietzsche’s ideas about music and the Dionysian-Apollonian distinction, has become a Dionysian artist, whose artwork as far as possible emulates Dionysian music and its power to reveal basic truths about the human condition.<sup>75</sup> This would seem to be the fuller meaning of Schütze’s claim (106) that Munch here, through his (partial) self-identification with the “genius of Nietzsche,” “takes on the role of a prophet and singer emphatically embracing his lyre.” As Schütze also seems to intimate, this message is emotionally powerfully reinforced by various

---

<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 49.

<sup>75</sup> Marja Lahelma interprets *Self-Portrait with Lyre* in relation to the myth of Orpheus, which she argues was a major artistic preoccupation in fin-de-siècle Europe (“Ideal and Disintegration,” 125, 127). Nevertheless, given that in her view Orpheus symbolizes the Apollonian-Dionysian duality, her interpretation and mine are much closer to each other than might seem at first glance. My analysis of this painting may also be seen as complementing that of Strawser’s “Dionysian Painting,” which delves into the Dionysian aspects of other works by Munch, such as *Madonna*, *The Scream*, and *The Blossom of Pain*.

formal aspects of the painting that score high on the scale of expressiveness and relatively low on that of mimesis. Among those formal aspects are the pervasive red-green complementarity, which infuses the work's meaning with a heightened sense of dramatic tension; and the spare use of bold lines which, together with the redness of his hair and the lyre (as Schütze suggests), emphatically conveys the price in emaciation and suffering that the artist has had to pay for the attainment of his Dionysian, tragic wisdom.<sup>76</sup>

To be sure, I am not here offering an *apologia* for the broadly Expressionist aesthetic exemplified by Munch's paintings. For that matter, neither am I claiming that it perfectly reflects Nietzsche's philosophy of art *even* as it is articulated in *Birth of Tragedy* (to which that Expressionist aesthetic seems most convincingly directly linked), never mind its articulation in his later

---

<sup>76</sup> Edvard Munch's *Self-Portrait with Lyre* as interpreted here shows how much of modernist art, especially in its Expressionist formal aspects, is best understood as the plastic-visual counterpart to lyric poetry according to Nietzsche's account of it in the *Birth of Tragedy*.

A qualification is called for. I am not claiming that Munch's understanding of the Apollonian-Dionysian distinction as explained by Nietzsche corresponds perfectly to mine. There would be no way to corroborate such a claim, even if, *per impossibile*, it happened to be true. What I am suggesting is that, like many artists of that time period, Munch probably had at least a working knowledge or intuitive grasp of the distinction, such that, had anyone expounded it to him the way I have done here, he would have quite easily recognized it and nodded his assent. The *Self-Portrait with Lyre* itself *prima facie* indicates as much. And after all, it is at present a commonplace of Munch scholarship that he was well acquainted with Nietzsche's main ideas. Indeed, according to distinguished art historian and critic J. P. Hodin, *Edvard Munch* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 106, Nietzsche was one of the very few writers whose collected works he possessed (which collection would have included *Birth of Tragedy*). Already by 1893 he had come to think of Nietzsche as the greatest among philosophers (Heller, *Munch*, 109). What is more, his encounters with Brandes, Przybyszewski, and Steiner, among others, whether in person or through their writings or both, would have given him ample opportunity to learn from them regarding the Apollonian-Dionysian distinction before seeking to give it artistic expression. (Brandes frequented The Black Piglet in Berlin, so Munch may well have run into him there. [Prideaux says Brandes was a "metaphorical telephone wire connecting" Munch and Nietzsche: *Behind the Scream*, 231.] At the very least, he could have read the published version of Brandes's famous lecture on Nietzsche [which was later included in his *Nietzsche* book under the title "An Essay on Aristocratic Radicalism"] prior to the production of the *Self-Portrait with Lyre*. Munch may also have encountered Steiner's book *Friedrich Nietzsche* [1895] by then. Each of those two works contains a discussion of the Apollonian-Dionysian duality. As for Przybyszewski, Munch's association with him in the 1890s is a thoroughly documented fact. Przybyszewski's theory of art, although not explicitly cast in the terms of that duality, clearly breathes its spirit. One cannot help thinking of it when pondering how he distinguishes between brain and soul: see his "Vigeland," in Nielsen, *Vigeland and Munch*, esp. 57.) The point, then, of providing an exposition of the Apollonian-Dionysian distinction as Nietzsche understands it is to throw light on one important part of the philosophical space in which Munch's mind may well have moved, not necessarily in complete or completely adequate possession of all the concepts in question, when creating such works of art. Only by doing this can we begin to determine with greater exactitude how true or untrue to Nietzsche's philosophical teachings Munch's artwork might have been. The same reasoning applies to any philosophical, scientific, or religious idea that can be said to have informed in some significant way any work of art where the artist himself has not provided anything like a complete verbal account of that influence, yet we nonetheless have fairly solid grounds for positing such an influence.

works.<sup>77</sup> It is noteworthy that one of the two painters Nietzsche calls on in *Birth of Tragedy* to illustrate a point is Raphael, a paragon of Classicism, who could hardly be further removed from the Expressionist sensibility; and as Gillespie points out, in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche explicitly presents himself as favoring “the classical European culture that grew out of the Italian Renaissance as opposed to the Romantic culture that grew out of the German Reformation and that is currently centered in Germany and manifest in Wagner.”<sup>78</sup>

All the same, there is much in the artwork of Munch, as indeed in that of many other modernist artists, that bespeaks a thoughtfully creative expression of Nietzschean ideas and motifs. To restate an earlier point, whereas for Plato, music in its purely intelligible form (that is, harmony in motion, a branch of mathematics) is assimilated to logos and for that reason has metaphysical truth-value or revelatory power, for Nietzsche (following the lead of Schopenhauer and Wagner), music, precisely in its separation from logos, has a metaphysical truth-value vastly superior to that of logos.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps Svenaeus goes too far when he says that Nietzsche was an Expressionist.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, if the foregoing, Dionysian-musical line of thinking forms the basic stratum of Nietzsche’s philosophical teaching as a whole, then we must concede that the attempt by Munch and other Expressionist artists to extend or adapt that line of thinking to the visual arts is congruent with and hence expressive of Nietzsche’s philosophy in a vitally important respect. We can also begin to understand why the visual art of Expressionists such as Munch, with its Dionysian, music-like power of evoking strong passions, was at one time, and is perhaps still, deemed by many intelligent and informed individuals, critics and artists included, to

---

<sup>77</sup> On this point, see Short, “Nietzsche and German Expressionist Art,” section 4, “Nietzsche *contra* Expressionism.” See also the excerpt from the essay “Thoughts on Timely and Untimely Art” by the Nietzschean earlier Max Beckmann in Washton Long, *German Expressionism*.

I should also mention, if only in passing, the tendency on the part of many a modernist artist to eclectically merge Nietzschean philosophical ideas with concepts plucked from leftist or egalitarian political ideologies such as anarchism, socialism, and Marxism, often in the process giving little or no thought to issues of logical coherence and accuracy of interpretation: see Diethel, *A to Z of Nietzscheanism*; Aschheim, *Nietzsche Legacy*.

<sup>78</sup> Gillespie, *Nietzsche’s Final Teaching*, 135.

<sup>79</sup> By music is meant here abstract music, or music unaccompanied by words (as in song) or dance (as in ballet) or dramatic action (as in opera or music drama). Examples of audible abstract music in the sense intended here are a Mozart symphony and a Beethoven string quartet, two types of purely instrumental music. For a discussion of abstract music as a branch of mathematics (i.e., harmony in motion), see Plato, *Republic* VII 530c8–531c4.

<sup>80</sup> Cited in Strawser, “Dionysian Painting,” 166.

be somehow more truthful, truer to life, than the art of their platonizing, rationalistic, mimetic, classical, naturalistic, etc., predecessors.<sup>81</sup>

#### NIETZSCHE, MUNCH, AND MODERNISM

What I have done is offered an example of the kind of thorough, detailed analysis of artwork that is needed to convincingly show the influence on it of a certain set of philosophical ideas, in the present instance Nietzsche's on a small but significant portion of Munch's artwork. It is precisely this kind of analysis of the artwork of not only Munch but also other representatives of modernist art which must be carried out for the centrality of Nietzsche's philosophy to that artistic tendency as a whole to be established.

Reinhold Heller has commented that "without Edvard Munch, German Expressionism would not have existed."<sup>82</sup> As stated in the first part of the present essay, this theme, coupled with Kessler's and the New Weimar's Nietzscheanizing influence on German Expressionist art, is what the *New Weimar* catalog should have taken up, instead of delving into Nietzsche's attraction to Emerson's philosophy and his own philosophical influence on American letters. Doing so, yet with the kind of rigor illustrated by the analysis of Munch proffered here, would go a long way towards vindicating the catalog's grand claim that Nietzsche was the philosopher of modernism. Furthermore, as we learn to "see" and read Nietzsche's writings through the interpretative lenses provided by Munch and modernist artists generally, our understanding of his philosophy on an affective and imaginative as well as intellectual level is bound to grow. Perhaps we will also arrive at the conclusion that no visual artist has done more than Munch to transmit, through the

---

<sup>81</sup> Michel Henry offers a phenomenological defense of what is in substance if not in name an Expressionist philosophy of art in *Seeing the Invisible*. Although Henry's focus is on Kandinskian abstraction, and he does not mention Munch, his overall argument is apropos in the present context. His main criticism of Expressionist (in the broader, ecumenical sense of the term) painters such as the Fauves, Nabis, Futurists, Orphists, and Paul Klee (and Munch would fall into this category as well) is that they remain committed to representationalism, in however attenuated a form. In Henry's view, these painters' use of formal elements of painting—line, color, texture, etc.—to represent, albeit not naturalistically or realistically, visible "external" objects such as people, horses, and bridges comes at the price of severely muting the intrinsic expressive power of those same formal elements. Kandinsky eventually clearly grasped this basic aesthetic truth, which is why he ended up expunging all traces of representationalism in his artwork, and made it purely abstract and therewith unequivocally Expressionist, *very much like abstract music*. The problem with the others, for Henry, was not that they were not Expressionists, but rather that they were muddled and half-hearted in their Expressionism—they were not Expressionist enough. Critical engagement with Henry's powerful Kandinskian argument would exceed the scope of the present study.

<sup>82</sup> R. Heller, "Edward Munch, Germany, and Expressionism," in *Munch and Expressionism*, ed. J. Lloyd and R. Heller (New York: Prestel, 2016), 35.

medium of visual arts, Nietzsche's philosophy—or at least a certain interpretation of it—to succeeding generations in a way that shapes their worldview and visual culture.

Again, what I am talking about here is no mere academic exercise. Analysis and interpretation of modernist artwork after the fashion advocated and attempted in this essay is of crucial significance to us, inasmuch as it serves to more fully illuminate the deep Nietzschean imprint on the soul of modern humanity, thereby enlarging both the historical self-understanding of Western culture and our understanding and appreciation of Nietzsche's philosophy. To restate the point with stark simplicity, we need to know what Nietzsche has done to and for us as well as what we have done to and for him—for better or worse. A livelier awareness of how the artwork of Edvard Munch mediates between Nietzsche's philosophy and ourselves turns out to be an important part of that quest.